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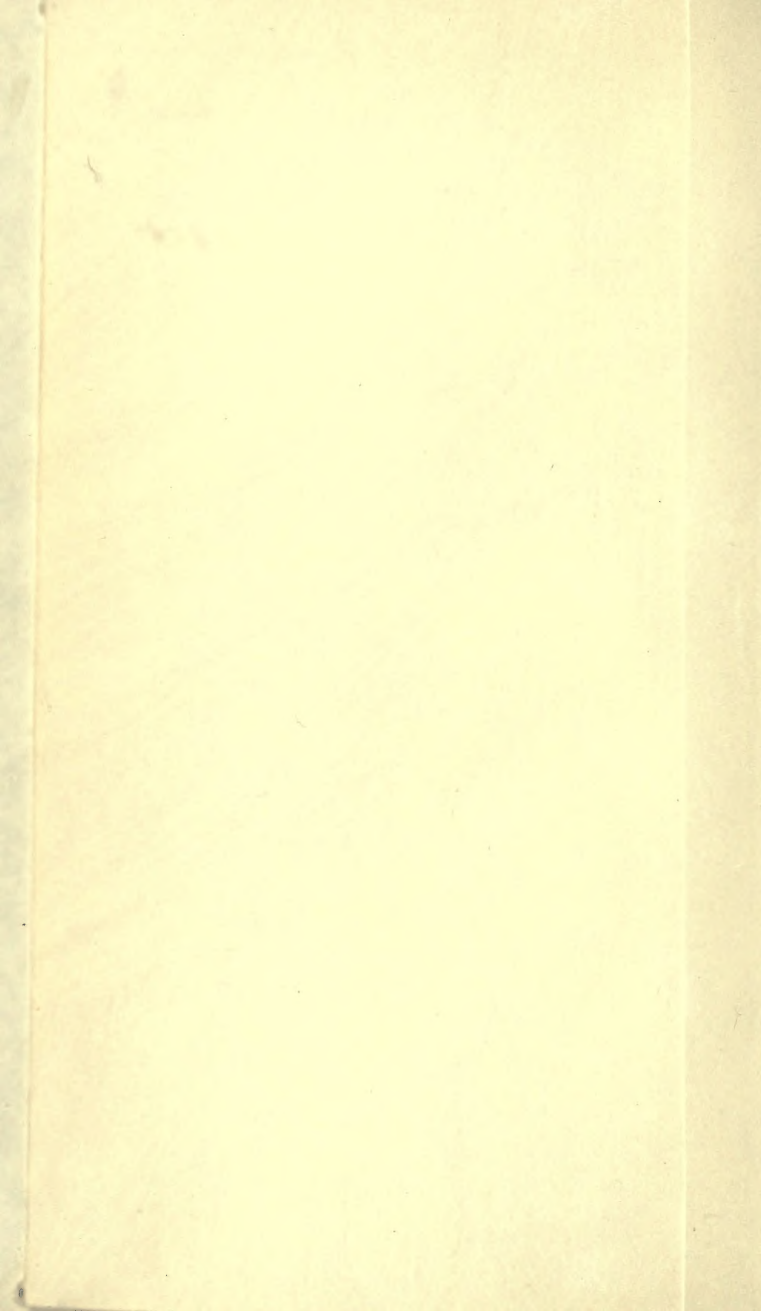



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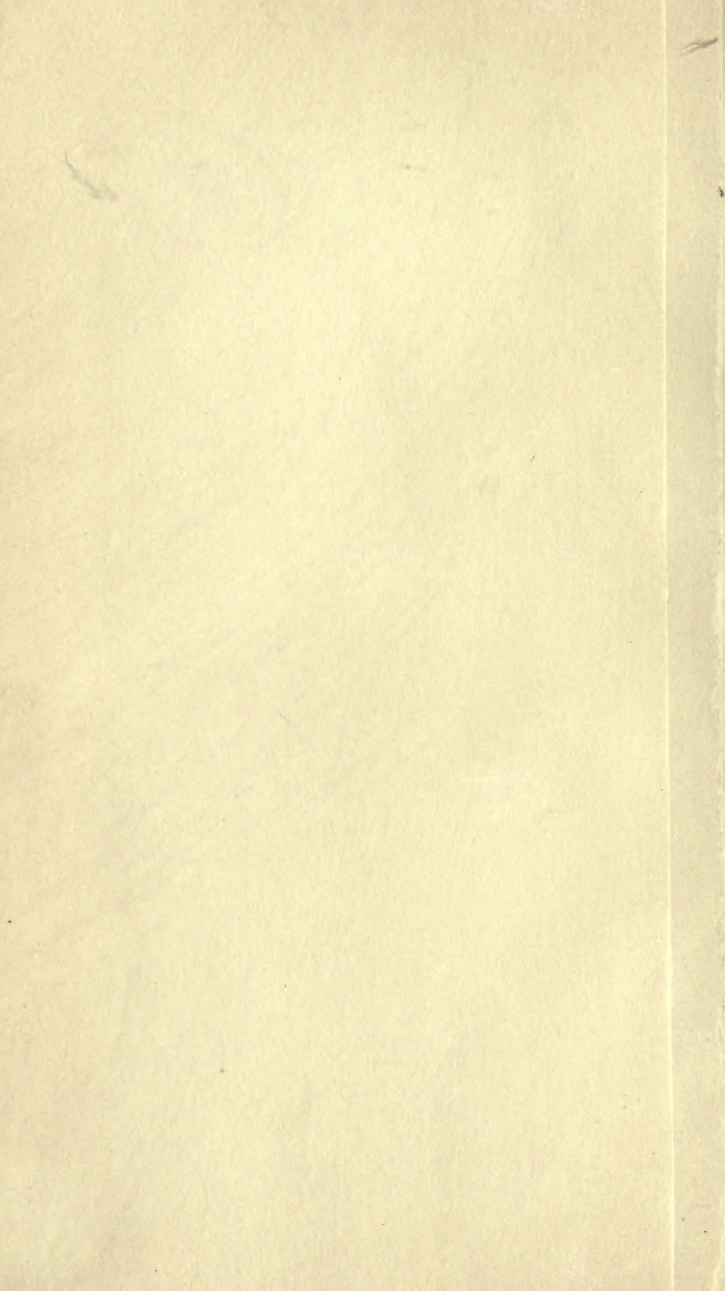


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THE INVISIBLE EVENT

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

NOVELS

THE EARLY HISTORY OF JACOB STAHL

A CANDIDATE FOR TRUTH

THE INVISIBLE EVENT

THE HOUSE IN DEMETRIUS ROAD

} *A Trilogy*

FANTASIES

THE HAMPDENSHIRE WONDER

GOSLINGS

THE INVISIBLE EVENT

BY

J. D. BERESFORD

" Whose spirit with divine ambition puff'd
Makes mouths at the invisible event.

.

. . . Rightly to be great

Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honour's at the stake."

HAMLET IV. 4

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1971

TO
BEATRICE

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BOOK I
TWO DAYS

THE INVISIBLE EVENT

I.

MORNING

1.

“It won’t be for long.”

Last night that little colloquial sentence had seemed a message of hope. All the vacillations, doubts, anxieties of the preceding weeks had been dissipated. When he had come back after that long day’s absence which had so harassed and perplexed her—she had not been able to drive away the doubts and fear of calamity after their misunderstanding of the night before—he had come back strangely resolute and determined, and she had been utterly relieved. Her nerves had been on edge for weeks. Not only his arguments had worn out her patience, but his whole attitude. That look of pain she had seen in his face, the look which had often moved her to tenderness, had become a source of irritation. She had doubted its origin. She had become more and more inclined to attribute it to the war of doubt that must be raging in his mind. He must have known that his arguments, his intentions, were more than questionable; he must have known that he could not reasonably defend his proposal.

As she had waited and looked for him last night on the steps of that house, she had longed for and dreaded the sight of him. It had been such a burning day, and, strong as she was, she was worn out.

She had never before felt the burden of her household duties so distasteful and arduous. Her mind, tortured by suspense, had reacted upon her body. She had stood there by the

railings and trembled, physically overcome and weak—washed out, as she expressed it. Even Mrs. Parmenter had noticed it; Betty had had a good excuse in the heat.

He would never guess how critical the moment had been. If he had come weak, apologetically pleading, with anxious, pitiful eyes and sad mouth, she would have broken away from him. However sorry for him she might have felt in the past, she would have had no pity for him then. That emotion had been used up, she could no longer respond to that note. If he had faced her with question and unspoken pleading in his face, she would have been cruel; she would have given up the boarding-house and gone home; she would have left him; she would never have seen him nor written to him again.

Instead of that he had commanded her. He had taken all responsibility to himself, taken her acquiescence for granted. That attitude had seemed to resolve all uncertainties. It had brought relief and the still ecstasy of nerves relaxed after unbearable tension, the perfect pleasure of conscious freedom from pain. Everything had been harmonised; her way had appeared so easy and so pleasant last night. She had accepted destiny; she had swung into the right drift. Surely all about her had been an applauding influence, encouraging and upholding. She had not thought—last night.

This morning. . . .

The day had come. From her bed she could see a flag of sunlight flung on the dirty yellow bricks of the yard-wall. In an hour she must get up and set about that routine of housework to which they had returned last night, full of joy in the knowledge that it would not be for long.

She had waked with those words in her mind, but they no longer brought consolation. They had come as a reminder, cold and brutal. She was alone, deserted, aware of the stillness of a bare, material world. That applauding influence had done its work and left her terribly alone. She must come down to the level of thought again, of realisation, of ugly, straight-faced common sense.

She had always prided herself upon her common sense, and it wore a disgustingly plain aspect this morning.

2.

She had amazingly promised to go and live with this man—live with him as his wife, although he had a wife living.

She hid her face from the sunlight for a time.

The incredible thing was that she was still herself. She had not changed in any way. She was still Betty Gale, the daughter of a Buckinghamshire rector; the partner in a Montague Place boarding-house, in which she did all the work—the practical housekeeper, the manager and cook of the whole establishment. Mrs. Parmenter, her partner, did almost nothing. These descriptions of herself were mere labels perhaps; but inside she was still the same.

According to the poets and the romancers, Love made a great change in one's whole being, in one's outlook on life. (She had read little enough—she had been too busy—but she knew enough for that.) If that were true, she was not in love. Apart from this test of literature, she was not at all sure on that point. She could find this morning no difference in herself, save a certain amazement at her relieved acquiescence on the previous night. Why had she said "Yes," and said it so gladly?

This morning the thought of the future filled her with fear. She was going to do something which would make her a social outcast. She was going to brand herself as a "bad woman"—that was her only phrase for it. And she had no excuse for taking this fatal step; she was precisely the same Betty who had scolded her younger sisters for carrying on the most harmless flirtations. They had often called her a "prude," said she was "too good to live." She had never flirted, not even with a curate. She had always stopped the least tendency to foolishness in a curate—a recognisable tendency which she had considered as an inexplicable failing in the unbeneficed clergy. Her only knowledge of them was among the Evangelicals; the type of ascetic High Churchman was almost unknown to her.

Worst of all was that she knew nothing about the man

with whom she had promised to run away. She had known him for just eight months.

His name was Jacob Stahl, the name of a German Jew; but she could see no evidence of either strain in him. His dark hair and blue eyes suggested the Celt. He had said that his mother was Irish.

How could she know that he was not unprincipled, that he would not tire of her in a few months, and leave her to her own resources? He had told her that he had been unfaithful to his wife while he was living with her—unfaithful with some beautiful woman whom he had known and loved before he married. That was a record which should make her hesitate, and how could she know that that was all? He might have kept back other delinquencies; this one admission had been made by accident.

Nevertheless she trusted him. There were certain marks of intellectuality and tenderness in his face which induced trust. Undoubtedly she trusted him, but if she were forced to make out a case—to her sisters Hilda and Violet, for instance—how could she possibly convince them that he was to be trusted? She knew that it would be impossible. The mere facts would condemn him from the outset.

She gave no thought, then, to the fact that he had no money. The issue upon which she was engaged was too great for that consideration. She went round and round her one tedious circle, until the freshness of her morning thought was dulled, and once more it was a relief to say: "Well, I've done it, anyway. I've promised, and I mean to stick to it."

How often those doubts were to come back, how often she was to find no solution but by an acceptance of destiny! Yet at the beginning she always wondered whether her clear morning thoughts were not those she ought to follow. She was so divided. Her instinct told her . . . she was not clear what it told her. Were her morning thoughts instinctive? Or was that longing to surrender instinctive? She had always been too reasonable; she had prided herself too much upon her common sense.

3.

Unhappily it was Sunday morning; worse still, it was the day before the August Bank Holiday. The house was nearly empty, and there was very little for her to do. She wanted work to-day; she wanted not to think.

She got up at half-past seven, put on a much-worn dressing-gown, hastily knotted up her hair in front of the glass, slipped her feet into bedroom slippers, picked up sponge and towel, and made her way up to the bathroom on the first floor. She left her sponge and bath-towel there, and climbed up two more floors to wake the maids, who slept in the attics. When she had made sure that they were getting up, she returned to the bathroom. She did not mind going about the house in a dressing-gown at this hour; no one was ever moving.

While she was in the bathroom she listened for the two maids to come downstairs—sometimes they had to be called a second time. It was almost impossible to get good servants in a boarding-house.

When she returned to her basement bedroom, she dressed quickly, and apparently spent not a single thought on her personal appearance. Yet, when her toilet was completed by a dark blue overall, and she entered the kitchen to begin the serious work of the day, she looked fresh and neat—a marked contrast to the two heavy-eyed and tousled maids, one of them on her knees before the kitchen grate, and the other looking up at the area railings through the kitchen window.

“Olive, will you do the steps and the hall?” said Betty with a touch of asperity; and the girl by the window moved away, moody and reluctant, without replying.

There had been trouble with Olive a few days before, and she was under notice. After the manner of her class, she struck the mean between rebellion and servitude—the useless, unhappy mean that serves no purpose.

“I wonder if we could do without a second girl until the house fills up again,” reflected Betty, as she made her way upstairs to sweep and dust the dining-room. Her partner,

Mrs. Parmenter, had promised to go to the registry-office; but she postponed the visit from day to day. She always had some excuse, and she was over sixty. The young and capable Betty was willing to make allowances for her.

As she ran the sweeper briskly over the worn Axminster, she was entirely absorbed with the problems of the moment; she was wondering whether Alice, the second maid, would consent to do the hall and front steps, if no substitute for Olive could be found immediately. Those steps marked Betty's limitation; in no circumstances would she consent to be seen kneeling in Montague Place.

When the carpet was swept, she frowned at the grate. Why would the boarders throw their cigarette-ends and ashes into the fireplace? There were plenty of ash-trays. It was one of those stupid fenders with curly iron-work that guarded secret hiding-places for dust and bits. It had to be tilted and shaken; the hearthbrush did not reach those recesses behind the overhanging curb, and the thing was heavy. Every morning Betty frowned at the grate.

At half-past eight the dining-room was "done," and she went down to the kitchen to cook the breakfast. At ten minutes to nine Olive was still pottering about the hall. Betty called up to her sharply, telling her to lay the cloth in the dining-room.

At five minutes past nine she heard the first boarders come down. She paused at her work to listen, and Alice looked at her quickly out of the corner of her eye.

Olive was coming down with the empty tray; she was coming very deliberately, and humming to herself.

"Is anyone down?" asked Betty, when the girl at last entered the kitchen.

"Two of 'em, miss," replied Olive carelessly, and exchanged a sly glance with Alice.

Betty was leaning over the gas-cooker, boiling out the frying-pan. "Who?" she asked, without looking up.

"I'm sure, miss, I didn't think to notice," replied Olive; and this time she winked at Alice, who giggled surreptitiously.

"Is the dining-room door shut?" asked Betty.

"I'm sure I couldn't say, miss," said Olive.

Betty set her lips together and made a little grimace at the frying-pan, then she straightened her back, took off the coarse apron, which had served as a protection to her overall, and made her way very quietly up the basement stairs.

The dining-room door was ajar, and she crept past it almost stealthily, and made her way quickly up to the second floor. One of the bedroom-doors was standing open wide, and she looked relieved. She went in and set about the work of a housemaid with the same brisk decision that she had shown in every action that morning.

Yet, while she occupied herself in making ready the room of the man to whom she had given that promise last night, the cloud of depression, that had threatened her since she was dressed, grew heavier. She worked, conscious of a feeling of dread. She might have been sentenced by some surgeon to undergo a critical operation. She was afraid.

She did not pause in her work to examine the cloud that hung over her; she was hurrying to finish the room and get away, before Jacob Stahl should have finished his breakfast and return to the tiny apartment he used as a study by day. She did not want to see him until after the midday dinner. In the meantime she proposed to lose herself in her work, and give no thought to the future.

One thought, however, would intrude itself, a thought too nearly related to her work to be pushed aside. How much did the maids guess? Olive had shown a marked inclination towards impertinence that morning. Olive was going, but, if she knew anything, Alice would know as well. Of course they chattered. They knew everybody's business. They did not know, certainly, the damning fact that Jacob Stahl was married; but it was bad enough for them to see that she was carrying on a more or less clandestine flirtation with one of the boarders.

As she patted and smoothed the quilt with deft, rapid movements, Betty was stirred by a brief feeling of irritation. Why had she been put into such an invidious position? He had no right to make love to her.

Her attentive ear caught the sound of a closing door and footsteps in the hall. She pushed the bed back against the wall with her knees, looked quickly round the room, made a perfunctory sweep with the duster, and then, with an "Oh! that will have to do for to-day," she slipped quietly out of the room and went up to the third floor.

On the upper landing she waited and listened. She heard someone come upstairs and pause at the open door of the room below. He was waiting for her. Perhaps he had heard her go upstairs. She stood perfectly still, and heard the door closed gently.

She crept quietly down, afraid lest he might come out again and look for her; he did sometimes. But when she was safely past his door, a picture suddenly presented itself very clearly to her mind. She saw the man behind that closed door settling down to write. His eyes were wistful and longing. She saw reproach in them. "Why had she avoided him?" his expression said. He would not have kept her from her work, and it was quite safe; everyone was in the dining-room.

She stopped halfway down the stairs to the first floor, and the vision seemed to her infinitely pathetic. What wonderful power was hers! By the most trivial act she could make the man miserable or happy for the whole morning. A great yearning to make him happy surged through her, a feeling that was in part recognisably physical. Her breast seemed to lift and widen.

She turned and went back. At his door she waited and listened. She heard him draw a chair forward to the table and sit down. Then she knocked very timidly, and heard him jump up, knocking the chair over. The door opened, and he stood before her with his face all aglow.

She put a finger to her lips, leaned forward and kissed him. "I can't stay," she said. "Be happy!" and, putting aside his detaining hands, she ran swiftly downstairs.

II.

BLOOMSBURY

1.

BETTY did not go up to dinner, but dined, as she had breakfasted, in her own room. She disliked the untidiness of such meals, but she did not want to face Jacob Stahl before the other boarders and Mrs. Parmenter. After dinner Mrs. Parmenter would go upstairs and lie down, and the two Germans who had not gone away for the holiday would be sure to go out.

It was nearly three o'clock before Betty went up to the drawing-room. There had been the dinner things to wash up, and Alice, whose turn it was to go out, had been permitted to depart early. That permission had marked a weakness on Betty's part; she knew she was trying to propitiate Alice. After the washing-up was accomplished, Betty had to change her dress.

She looked into the dining-room as she went by, noted that Olive had not swept up the crumbs from the carpet, and then, after a final moment of hesitation outside the door, entered the drawing-room.

Jacob was standing by the mantelpiece, looking, she thought, a little stern. "Well," she said, "here I am—at last." She went straight over to the sofa and sat down.

"I thought you were never coming," he said, and he came and sat down near her, but not very near.

"It's Alice's afternoon out," replied Betty, and looked at him questioningly, trying to read his mood. He was not usually so restrained when they were alone together. She

wondered whether he was regretting so soon the responsibility he had assumed last night, or was he merely vexed? Did he think she had been trying to avoid him?

"I had to help Olive, you see," she went on quickly. "She's leaving in a few days, and she's being rather tiresome."

"Curse Olive!" said Jacob. "Was that why you didn't come up to lunch?"

She nodded. "Were you expecting me?" she asked foolishly.

"I hoped," he said.

She felt that she must break through this restraint of his.

"Is anything the matter?" she said.

"Matter? No! Why?"

"Oh, well, you are rather—funny this afternoon."

He came a little nearer and took her hand. "You meant what you said last night, dear?" he asked.

"Of course."

Now that she was with him, she did not want to think of the future; she was satisfied with the present. She felt that she could be content to let things go on as they had been going for the past eight months, if only he, too, would be content.

"That's not a very convincing answer," he said.

"I don't know what else I can say," returned Betty.

"It was the tone more than the words," said Jacob.

"Of course I meant what I said," she repeated.

She saw a flicker of doubt cross his face, but he went on:

"Will you come soon?"

She fenced. "Where are you suggesting we should go?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Does that matter? I thought of Cornwall. One can live cheaply down there."

"We shall have to live *very* cheaply, shan't we?" said Betty, and her tone and expression suggested a whimsical doubt as to whether they would be able to live at all.

"Oh, I think we shall have enough," he replied with confidence. "I've got nearly a hundred pounds in the bank, and I'm making on an average about ten pounds a month by reviewing, counting what I get by selling some of the books."

"And supposing," said Betty, "that your editor didn't send you any more books to review?"

"Oh, of course, if you are going to start supposing," said Jacob, with a touch of temper, and added: "Supposing I died, for instance. . . ."

"What would become of me?" continued Betty thoughtfully.

"Betty!" he said sharply.

"What?" She looked up at him for a moment, and then looked away again. She could not meet the reproach in his face.

"You mean that you want to get out of it," he said.

That was what she had meant, and she was quite aware of it. "No, no, I don't, dear," was her answer; "only, surely we must be a little practical about it, and consider the future."

"Back again at the old place," said Jacob. He got up quickly from the sofa, went over to the window, and stood there with his back to the room.

Betty sat still. The choice was still unmade then, she thought. That cloud which had hung over her all the morning might still be dissipated. Already she was conscious of a feeling of relief. Why should she not end everything now, once and for ever? There would be a scene—quite a short scene, probably—and then he would go away and forget her. She put her head back on the sofa-cushions and shut her eyes.

For quite five minutes neither of them moved or spoke. The green-veined marble clock on the mantelpiece let off a single sharp "ping." At that Jacob turned quickly. "Surely it isn't half-past three yet," he said.

"I think it's fast," replied Betty.

"Must be. Quite a quarter of an hour."

"About that, I think," she agreed.

Jacob moved out of the window and sat down in a chair a few feet from the sofa. "Doesn't matter smoking in here this afternoon?" he asked; and when she shook her head, he lighted a cigarette.

This was to be the end, was the thought in Betty's mind. Perhaps there would not even be a scene.

"In a sense," began Jacob suddenly, and without apparent reference to anything that had gone before—"in a sense, I am acting a part. 'I am to-day what yesterday I was, to-morrow I shall not be less'—or more. But in the right sense, as I see it, I am merely expressing something that was potential in me before, which I had not had the courage to express."

She looked at him, wondering. She was not sure what he intended as yet.

"Something happened to me yesterday," he went on. "At six o'clock or thereabouts I had quite determined to drown myself. I had decided the place and the method and all the details." He looked at her thoughtfully, and noted that she winced ever so slightly.

"You can forget that," he said quickly. "I haven't the least intention of doing that now, whatever you decide. I had a moment of inspiration yesterday; I saw what was the matter with you, and me, and all of us."

"What?" asked Betty.

"Cowardice," replied Jacob. "Beastly, cringing, sloppy fear! We are afraid, you and me and all the lot of us. We are afraid of what people will say and think; we are afraid to do anything that is not strictly conventional; we are afraid to be ourselves; and we are even afraid of all sorts of contingencies and eventualities in the future—loss of work or death. I'm not putting all this on to you, dear. I admit that I have been and still am afraid; that I try to count up the cost and work it all out, as if I could see the future and understand the present. Only if one is going to conduct all one's life on those principles, it seems to me that it is best to acknowledge it. Don't let us pretend that we are being awfully wise and reasonable and full of common sense, because we are not. Let's just admit that we are two rotten cowards, and that we won't fight for happiness because we are so beastly afraid of what'll happen to us if we are so outrageously daring. Let's be quite, quite honest and say that we are going to slave and be miserable, because we have the spirits of slaves,

and are going to do what Mrs. Parmenter and the rest of the Parmenters of this world want us to do. Shall we?"

"Oh! but, darling, it isn't only that," Betty broke out. She had been listening intently, half impressed; but she thought she saw the flaw in his argument.

"What, then?" asked Jacob grimly.

"If—if you weren't married," she stammered. "If it was only a question of the money, I wouldn't mind, not for an instant, you know I wouldn't. I would come to-morrow, only . . ."

"Why didn't you say that last night?" he interrupted her.

"I wasn't quite myself last night," said Betty. She puckered her forehead and drew her brows together.

"Meaning to say that you want to take it all back?" suggested Jacob.

"No, not exactly; I . . ." She paused, for Jacob was smiling. His face expressed a genuine, if somewhat wistful, amusement.

"What?" asked Betty succinctly.

"Oh, my Lord!" said Jacob, "it is awfully difficult. Do you know that I have only just realised that I have been doing the old thing all over again, only in a new way—arguing, and all the rest of it, only from another standpoint. Oh, Betty, my dear, it is *hard* not to be oneself."

She was puzzled. "What *do* you mean, dear?" she asked.

He was still smiling. He came and sat beside her on the sofa and put his arms about her. "Why didn't you tell me?" he said.

"I don't understand," expostulated Betty; but she leaned her head against him and let him kiss her.

"That was all wrong, that argument," he said. "That wasn't part of the inspiration at all. I am going to do it properly now."

"How?" she put in.

He held her closer still. "Like this, dear," he went on. "We aren't going to argue any more. You are just coming away with me soon; and you're not to talk any more non-

sense about money and my dying, and all the rest of it. Leave that to me. And it's no good saying 'No,' for I say 'Yes,' and I'm not going to accept any excuses. You've got to come."

And again a feeling of rest and peace came to Betty. The applauding influences were round about her once more. Why should she worry? Why should she not leave everything to him? He took all the responsibility. She was about to answer him, when they heard soft and rather slovenly footsteps descending the stairs.

"Damn it!" said Jacob. "Here's that cursed old Parmenter!"

They moved apart quickly.

2.

Mrs. Parmenter looked into the room, advancing her head round the door, while her body as yet remained invisible. "Oh!" she ejaculated; "I didn't know you were here"; and she hesitated a moment before coming into the room.

Jacob leaned back in the chair to which he had escaped, with a movement of impatience, and then, frowning, produced and lighted another cigarette.

"Come in, dear," said Betty, smiling. "Couldn't you get to sleep this afternoon?"

Mrs. Parmenter lifted her chin and swallowed. "It's the heat, I think," she remarked, as she sat down. "I must say I find it very trying. I don't remember when I felt it more than I have the past few days." She drifted into a stream of reminiscence concerning her past experience of hot weather.

Jacob paid no attention. He was wondering whether Betty had not been genuinely relieved by this interruption of his pleading. He looked at her, and noted that she was smiling, gracious. Why could she not let this intruding old woman see that she was not wanted? He, on his part, was doing his best. There were plenty of other rooms in which Mrs. Parmenter might sit. Was it not because Betty was

afraid? If she intended to face the world, why should she not make a beginning here, at once? She could have no deep-seated intention, or why should she go out of her way to propitiate Mrs. Parmenter—to pretend that she preferred her to stay in the room?

The marble clock chimed four, catching its breath between each stroke as if it feared interruption before its precious message was delivered.

Mrs. Parmenter peered up, short-sightedly, at the dial. "Four o'clock," she remarked, apparently anxious to reassure the clock that due attention had been given to its claim upon their attention.

Jacob was about to say that the clock was a quarter of an hour fast, but Betty got up from the sofa and remarked that she had better see about getting the tea, and it came to him that after tea they might get rid of Mrs. Parmenter.

When he was alone with the older woman, it occurred to him that he might cut the ground from under Betty's feet by making some announcement of their intention. "It's only a question of courage," he said to himself, and then there came the suggestion, Would it be fair to Betty? Had he the right to make any such announcement without her permission? After all, there were limits to one's influence over another human being; there were definite cases in which prudence was necessary. It was not all a question of fear.

As if in reply to his first impulse, Mrs. Parmenter gave him an opening.

"And aren't you going to take any holiday this year, Mr. Stoll?" she asked. "I'm surprised that you care to stay in London through the heat, when you've nothing to keep you."

"I am thinking of going away soon," said Jacob.

"You were saying something about Cornwall soon after you first came, I remember—six months or more ago it must be now. Dear me! How time flies! Perhaps you were thinking of going there?"

"If I did go to Cornwall, I should stay there," said Jacob tentatively. He looked keenly at the ageing woman before

him to see if she would give any sign of comprehending the thought in his mind. He noticed, for the first time, that her lips drew together mechanically now and again; it was an incipient form of the "mouthing" of the aged. Already she has begun to die, he thought; she had got nothing out of life, and now there was no hope for her!

"Well, well, we should be sorry to lose you, of course," said Mrs. Parmenter; "but I've noticed you've been looking a little peaked lately, and, after all, health's the first consideration."

Jacob was startled. This was a hint that could not be mistaken. He remembered Mrs. Parmenter's eagerness to keep him on that occasion six months ago when he had expressed his determination to leave. She suspected something, and he wondered whether she could possibly have learned in some roundabout way that he was married.

"Do you want to get rid of me?" he asked, with an air of banter.

Mrs. Parmenter's head quivered slightly, and again Jacob thought, "She has begun to die."

"Not in that sense, of course," she replied vaguely. "Of course, we should be very sorry to lose you. I do so like to have literary gentlemen in the house. . . ."

"In what sense, then?" prompted Jacob, as she paused.

"Well, as I'm sure you'll understand, Mr. Stoll," said Mrs. Parmenter, and the signs of senile decay became more marked as her nervousness increased, "we have to be very careful in our position. And though I feel quite sure—quite sure—that there's nothing more than harmless friendship between you and Miss Gale—perfectly harmless friendship—and I should be the last person to object in any way, we have to think of people who are not perhaps too particular themselves, and aren't above thinking the worst of other people. There are the German young gentlemen, for instance—very nice, well-behaved young gentlemen, I'm sure, and I've no complaint to make against them; but, being foreigners, and used, no doubt, to different ways and so on, I'm afraid they don't look at friendship in quite the same light as you and I. I

know there's been talking, and I'm sure you'll take a hint from me in the spirit in which it's offered, Mr. Stoll."

Jacob had grown very red during this long speech, and once or twice he had been on the verge of interruption. Now he hesitated. He was afraid to compromise Betty in any way without her consent. If he said that they were "engaged," Betty might deny the statement when she returned with the tea. Then embarrassment made him angry. He was in a false position, and afraid to commit himself to the truth.

"What rot!" he murmured.

Mrs. Parmenter was affronted. Her head shook more violently. "I don't think 'rot'" —she approached the word delicately, as if afraid of contamination—"is quite a nice word to use, Mr. Stoll," she said.

"Oh, well, perhaps not. I'm sorry," returned Jacob. "But I do hate all this leering and suspicion—among the German boys, of course—as if no one could be decently civil to any woman without being—well, beastly."

Mrs. Parmenter sucked in her lips and raised her eyebrows. She was shocked now, as well as affronted. Jacob had put the thing too plainly for decency, in her opinion, and had thereby condemned himself.

"Well, I'm sure you'll think it over, Mr. Stoll," she said with dignity.

Jacob sighed, got up, and walked over to the window. He was trying to think of the right, convincing thing to say, and he was conscious that nothing, however convincing to the ordinary individual, could alter the opinion of this old woman, who had long passed the stage when she could accept a new point of view. Her mind had become petrified. Her very body was turning to stone, or ossifying, which came to much the same thing. She was still the same outwardly, but, in fact, she was dead, had been dead ever since any form of growth had become impossible for her. She should be labelled, thought Jacob savagely, "Here lies the mind and spirit of one who has ceased to grow."

Before he had made up his mind how to reply, he heard Betty bringing up the tea.

3.

The air of constraint and artificiality which had followed Mrs. Parmenter's coming, was even more pronounced when Betty returned. She was instantly conscious that her partner and Jacob had had some disagreement. She looked at Jacob suspiciously, and the rather sulky, half-deprecating glance he returned made her still more uneasy. "Was it possible," she wondered, "that he had made some premature announcement?" Dread seized her. Outwardly she appeared calm and practical as ever, inwardly she was shaking with fear. If he had spoken without her consent, she would deny everything he had said. He had no right to attempt coercion. If she did take such a desperate step as this, she must be a free agent.

Mrs. Parmenter, with a black-bordered handkerchief spread in her lap, was unusually silent; but she replied to any remarks offered by Betty at sufficient length to show that she had no specific cause of offence against her partner. There was an air of deliberate gentility about these conversational efforts of the older woman; she appeared anxious to demonstrate that she could maintain a semblance of decent calm, however ruffled.

At last, to Jacob's infinite relief, she gathered together the corners of her handkerchief and carefully shook into the slop-basin a few crumbs of rice-cake. Then she rose, and, turning to Betty, said: "Could you come up to my room in a quarter of an hour, dear?"

"Very well," returned Betty.

Jacob opened the door, and Mrs. Parmenter acknowledged the courtesy by a slight bow as she passed him.

To Jacob she appeared as a dying woman, to Betty as the representative of public opinion.

"What have you been saying?" she asked, with a spurt of anger, when Jacob had come back to the tea-table.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I said nothing. It was she who said things," he returned. "She has given me notice."

Betty frowned. "Why? You must have told her something—given her some hint."

"I didn't. I felt inclined to."

"Oh, but you mustn't!" she broke out vehemently. "You've no right to. I haven't promised."

Jacob's eyebrows went up. "No?" he asked bitterly.

"I have said I will come, and I will, of course," said Betty; "but I never said *when*. I won't be rushed into it."

Jacob looked at her and hesitated. How impossible it seemed now to play the strong man, to put his arm round her and insist! She would repulse him pettishly. She would know that he was playing a part; he would know it himself. In a mood of disgust with his own weakness, he sought an outlet in ill-temper.

"Oh, I see!" he said. "There was a Jesuitical reservation. You promised the act, but not the time; you can go on putting it off and putting it off till we're both sick of each other, and then ask me to release you from your promise."

"You haven't told me what Mrs. Parmenter said," prevaricated Betty.

"Oh, the usual rot!" He shrugged his shoulders again. "She knew, of course, that everything was perfectly respectable and genteel, but the German boys—'gentlemen' she said—had filthy minds, and were making horrible insinuations, and perhaps, in the circumstances, it would be better if I went to live in the Straits Settlements. I am not trying to quote her exact words. That was the effect of it."

"And what did you say?"

"I said it was all rot."

"And then?"

"She sniffed as though the word was indecent."

"You didn't give her the least hint?"

"Oh no, not the least. In the eyes of Mrs. Parmenter and the gentility she represents, you are still a pattern of respectability. You are not compromised. You still have a chance to attain your supreme destiny. You may still hope, if you work hard enough, to become even as Mrs. Parmenter some day."

Betty looked distressed. "You can't realise my position," she said. "You can't put yourself in my place."

"I can," returned Jacob. "I can, but I don't want to. I know what is the right thing for us to do. Yes, I do, I know. And I don't want to dwell on all the things that will make me afraid. I want to be brave, and you won't help me."

She smiled faintly at that final admission of weakness; it made her long to help him.

"I'm sorry, dear," she said, and held out her hand.

He came and sat beside her. "It's a funny thing, isn't it," he asked, "that at one moment you despise me for my weakness, and the next moment it seems to be the only thing that appeals to you. Why is it?"

She shook her head. "I don't know; it's like that," she said, and neither of them could find any other explanation.

"I *must* go and see Mrs. Parmenter," said Betty a few minutes later.

Jacob frowned. "Why?" he asked.

"You heard me say I would," she reminded him.

"Anyway, there's no hurry."

"Yes, I must go now. When I've seen Mrs. Parmenter, I've got the sweets to make."

"Oh Lord!" ejaculated Jacob.

"Oh, well, never mind," said Betty soothingly, as she stood up. "Everyone will be out to-morrow; we can do what we like."

"That's a promise," urged Jacob.

She nodded.

"Even if old Parmenter makes a fuss?"

"You're sure you haven't said anything?" asked Betty, suddenly alarmed again.

"My dear, haven't I told you?" he said, with a touch of irritation.

She smiled. "And hadn't you better go upstairs and do some work?" she asked.

"There's not much to do just now," he said. "Holidays and all that, you know. There are very few books coming in."

Nevertheless, after Betty had gone, he went up to his tiny box of a bedroom, and set himself to write a review. He was intimidated by the thought that something of his old incompetence was returning. It was true that he had not been working much lately, and it was so easy to find an excuse. And while it was also true that he had few books in hand for review, and that these books were unimportant, he realised that he might make work for himself; might attempt articles, short stories.

This was a version of his old trouble. He could do the work that was put before him, but he was seized with a feeling of ennui and incapacity when called upon for invention or initiative. He had struggled against that weakness, and once he had so far conquered it, apparently, as to write a novel. He had written it against the grain by an effort of will, and when the thing was finished, he knew it to be worthless. He had never submitted it to a publisher, and now he was thankful that he had destroyed the manuscript. "Rotten" was the only word he ever used to describe that novel to himself. That was his final and perfectly sincere criticism.

But when he had finished his review, he still sat, pen in hand, looking at the clean sheets of foolscap which lay before him, and a sudden urgent desire to write came to him. He had no plan in his mind, no idea whether for a novel, an article, or a short story. He only wanted to put words on paper; what words he did not know. Surely no man or woman ever began a book with less regard for Meredith's advice!

He got up and paced the room—two steps to the door and two back to the table. In his mind a fierce argument was in progress. One part of himself was logically opposing another, a quite unreasonable part. His thoughts fell into dialogue, and the reasonable side said pettishly: "How can I write, you fool, when I haven't the least idea what to write *about*?" "Never mind," came the answer, "sit down and write!" "But how can I *begin*?" still more peevishly asked the logical Jacob. "Sit down and try," was the foolish response.

"Oh, all right!" said Jacob aloud, still defiant, still bent on demonstrating his inability.

He sat down and picked up his pen, and the action seemed to bring that other side of him into command. "Something, anything," he murmured, and almost unconsciously began. This is what he wrote:

"He awoke and sat up. He was afraid of the darkness. He held his breath and listened. Had they had prayers? Were they all gone to bed? He could not remember whether his mother had been in to say good-night . . ."

"I haven't the least idea what it's all about," chuckled Jacob, "but it's a beginning."

He had a picture in his mind of a little boy in bed, terrified at the darkness, and, as he wrote, the feeling of the scene grew upon him; he experienced; he shivered with dread; his hands and feet grew cold.

He went on to describe the sound of a footstep in the hall below, and he followed the sound slowly up the stairs, pausing frequently for some word to convey the value of the noises he himself could hear so vividly in imagination.

When the sound of footsteps reached the door, the boy cried out. He was convinced that it was a burglar, and despite his terrors he jumped out of bed and opened the door, only to discover his father in a dressing-gown with a candle in his hand.

At that point Jacob laid down his pen and sat for a long time staring out of the window. The urgent desire to write had gone, but in place of it had come a vision of the story's continuation. He saw that what he had written was in some sense an allegory, a parable of the boy's determination to investigate life in face of all terrors. And he saw the story of the boy's future developing in a novel without plot or climax. Scenes came to him without effort, episodes that related his hero in some degree to the experiences of Jacob's own life. But the figure of the boy was not his own, and it was miraculously clear. He could see with perfect distinctness every detail of the boy's face and expression, and when the period of the story was suddenly shifted, the boy appeared

as a youth, as middle-aged man, as an old man, and in each vision he could trace a resemblance to the child who sat up in bed and was afraid of the darkness.

"Now, that's a story I *could* write," thought Jacob; "but I suppose no publisher would look at it."

Nevertheless he felt extraordinarily elated and happy. He felt strong and capable, he was conscious of wonderful power.

A tap at the door startled him.

"Are you coming down to supper?" asked Betty, putting her head into the room.

"Oh yes. Is it ready?" he asked.

"All but," she said.

"Come in one minute, dear," he said excitedly. "I've got something to read to you. I want to know what you think of it."

"Is there time now?" she asked.

"Yes, rather. It's only three pages," said Jacob. "You can leave the door open. Come and sit on the bed."

She hesitated a moment, but she came in and sat down. He read his three pages to her.

"What do you think of it?" he asked eagerly.

"It's awfully real," she said. "What happened afterwards?"

He made a gesture. "That's a whole book," he explained. "I'll tell you after supper if we get a chance. But, honestly, do you really like that bit?"

"I do! I like it very much," said Betty. "I want to hear some more. Are you going to write the whole book?"

He nodded emphatically. "It's an inspiration," he said; and then characteristically, "but I don't suppose any publisher would take it."

"Don't be so silly!" Betty encouraged him. "How can you possibly tell? Personally, that's the sort of writing I love. I love the detail of it."

"Did it make you feel like the boy felt?" he asked, still longing for praise.

"Absolutely," said Betty.

"Good!" said Jacob. He got up and stood in front of her. "That's the sort of book I *can* write," he explained.

"Well, you shall," she returned.

"I *will*, if you'll help me," he said.

"How can I help you?" she asked.

"By doing what you've done this evening. You've no idea what a difference it makes—oh! all the difference in the world. With you, I could do anything."

Betty looked faintly distressed. "Help me up," she said, and held out her hands to him.

"I've been talking to Mrs. Parmenter," she said.

"What did she say?" he asked.

"Lots of things. Come on; supper's all ready. I'll tell you afterwards," replied Betty.

The little room was growing dark. Outside, the landing was darker still. But when they had come out of Jacob's bedroom and closed the door behind them, Betty was conscious of a feeling of relief and of safety. Here, in the darkness of the public landing, she could speak of things with greater freedom. She stopped and took Jacob's hand.

"Do you really want me so much?" she whispered.

"More than I can tell you," he replied, and for a moment they stood quite still, peering at each other in the dusk.

"I *will* come," she said at last.

4.

Her interview with Mrs. Parmenter had been anything but satisfactory.

Betty had found her partner sitting at the window with an air of exaggerated resignation. Her bony hands lay placidly in her lap, seamed hands, the backs corrugate with an entangled cordage of hard upstanding veins. At her thin and hollowed temples, also, the veins stood out as if they thrust their way with difficulty between the bone and the shrunken skin. Her cap and toupé were arranged with precision. Her whole attitude expressed a dry and faded dignity.

Betty closed the door softly behind her and came forward

and stood by the little table in the window. The room affected her unpleasantly. It was unlike the rest of the house. This bedroom contained all the few mementoes of Mrs. Parmenter's earlier life, typified, in some sense, by crocheted lace and wool, by the plush of the photograph frames, by the pleated silk behind the glass of the tall, narrow bookcase—silk that appeared brown unless one unfolded the pleats, to be startled by the original, vivid green—by old and dirty macramé work, by bulging glass letter-weights that disclosed magnified, distorted views of Brighton or St. Paul's Cathedral, by all the meaningless ornament and fussy, dusty material that marked the middle-class home in the period conveniently dubbed Mid-Victorian. It was all faded and dry; the room smelt faintly musty, the smell of old, stale lavender.

"Sit down, dear," said Mrs. Parmenter; and Betty sat down in an unsteady chair, with legs that were turned to represent a string of welded balls. The chair was still black and shiny, but the glory of its pristine gilding could be seen in those covered retreats which had escaped polishing.

"I want to know what you're going to do?" said Mrs. Parmenter.

"About what?" prevaricated Betty.

"Things can't go on like this," returned Mrs. Parmenter. "There ought to be some understanding. It isn't only the German young gentlemen, there's Mrs. Blakey coming back Tuesday, and she's shown plainly enough already what she thinks of it, besides Miss Dalkeith and Mr. Franklin. I don't say there's anything wrong—I'm quite sure there isn't—but I feel there ought to be some sort of understanding."

"Yes," said Betty.

"If he hasn't spoken . . ." continued Mrs. Parmenter, but Betty interrupted her.

"He has," she said, and felt tempted to add that he had spoken of nothing else for three months.

"Very well, that clears the way," said Mrs. Parmenter. "If, as you say, he has spoken and you've accepted him"—she paused, but Betty made no reply—"and you've accepted him, the engagement ought to be announced, and Mr. Stoll

ought to go and live in another house until he can afford to get married. He could come here, perhaps, to dinner once a week, and you might see him now and again outside; and he might take you to a theatre when he could afford it. I understand that he hasn't any means to speak of . . . ”

Betty lost the drift of her partner's thin, even monologue. She was wondering if she dare tell the truth. She saw clearly enough the selfishness of this dry, elderly woman, knew that all this creaking, conventional speech covered a living eagerness to retain her services in the boarding-house. That was the essential from Mrs. Parmenter's point of view; the failing creature knew well enough that without the help of this active, vital young woman, the boarding-house could not be kept decent. Betty was not only manager and caterer, she was also cook and head-housemaid; she did the work of two servants, and did it better than any two servants could have done it. She was so keen and so practical, she took such an interest in her work, was so anxious that the venture should succeed—and it was succeeding.

Betty saw her partner's point of view clearly enough, but she did not resent it. She was sorry for the older woman. Mrs. Parmenter's life had not been a success, and Betty, with her warm, generous impulses, wished to make the poor creature's last days as happy as might be. Mrs. Parmenter was a distant connection by marriage. She had married a cousin of Betty's mother's, a man who had failed in his business and then absconded. No one knew whether he were alive or dead. He had eluded pursuit. But most damning of all, from the present point of view, Mr. Parmenter had run away with another woman. Betty knew all too well what her partner's attitude would be towards unfaithful husbands. And she herself, when she was surrounded by this atmosphere of gentility, could appreciate that attitude. It did not appear either foolish or lifeless. It agreed with all she had been taught, with all that she had believed until a few months ago.

She tapped her lower teeth with her thumb-nail and stared out of the window.

“ . . . to say nothing of your own future,” her elderly,

worldly-wise partner was saying. "Don't think as I've anything to say against Mr. Stoll, who's a nice, quiet, well-behaved young gentleman enough, so far as I've been able to judge, but I have my doubts whether he'll ever be able to provide you with a home. I should be the last person to say anything against him behind his back, but"—and her old head trembled with the effort to suppress her emotion—"it doesn't seem to me as he'll ever do much; a little lackadaisical, I've thought, and perhaps not too fond of work, or how does it come about that he's so badly off? and I suppose he must be past thirty. I've had some experience, my dear, as you know well enough, and when a young man has got no prospects at his age, it's fairly certain as he never will have. . . ."

Mrs. Parmenter was adopting the worst possible line of argument. Age had dulled her powers of insight. Betty's change of attitude, from that listless fidgetting with her teeth to the slight frown, the determined set of the mouth and the still hands, seemed a good sign to Mrs. Parmenter. Her dull, slow eyes watched and noted, but her spirit could no longer influence the inertia of the failing flesh; she merely saw, she could not comprehend. She thought that her cause was won. She searched her mind for the final, compelling argument.

Betty was thinking now of Jacob. She was freed from the bonds of that musty room. A great thrill of unselfish love had swept through her. It was in her power to save him from failure. She knew his weaknesses and loved him for them. It was hers to give. She could help him, he had told her so a hundred times. It was for her to sacrifice herself, to face all the contempt she dreaded. She dare not even express the truth to this poor, incipiently paralytic old woman.

"I love him," said Betty suddenly in the middle of Mrs. Parmenter's final argument.

The older woman looked shocked, and the trembling of her head became so marked that she had to make strange, stretching movements of her neck to hide her agitation.

She appeared to be swallowing some obstinate, unmasticated crumb.

"Of course, in *that* case . . ." she began with an affectation of dignity.

"Only," continued Betty, "there's—there's a reason why we shouldn't be married—just yet."

Panic had been responsible for the last two words. On the verge of full confession, she had been overwhelmed with shame. She could not dare the truth. She hid her face in her hands.

"Well, to be sure there is," returned the blind woman in the stiff armchair. "You'd hardly get married on twopence a week, I suppose, even if you only had your two selves to think of, and to bring children into the world . . ."

Betty rose quickly. "There's no question of that," she said. "But I don't see that we shall do any good by talking. I'll do something. You're quite right—things can't go on. I must go now. I've got the sweets to make for supper."

She went out quickly and ran down into the kitchen. She felt the necessity for active occupation. She was always somewhat impetuous in her actions, but this evening she almost scared Olive by the urgency of her movements.

But when her sweet-making was accomplished, there was still half an hour to be lived before supper, and she went into her gloomy, underground bedroom and tried desperately to think. Yet she did not, could not, think; she only felt, and the one clear solution which came to her was that this war within herself could not continue. She must choose. She must decide definitely. If she adopted one course or the other, she could be at peace again. Either course would bring a restful certainty, and really, at that moment, she did not care which she adopted, if only the whole affair could be settled for ever.

She went up to Jacob's bedroom at a quarter past eight, intending to break her promise of the night before, to tell him he must go away and never see her again.

On the stairs she changed her mind, and decided to put off decision until the next morning.

And then she had found him, full of enthusiasm; his face

alight with the glow of success. She had listened to his work, and, she had believed in it and in him. He would do great things with her to help him, she had thought. His little room was throbbing with the promise of achievement. . . .

5.

"I *will* come," she said in the darkness of the landing.

He put his arms round her and held her tightly.

"With you, darling," he whispered, "anything, everything is possible."

"But I must go home first. Just for one day to see my father and my sisters," she said.

"They won't influence you?"

"No—oh no."

"Shall you tell them everything?"

"I don't know. Perhaps."

They were so near together, their faces touching, that they whispered their brief interchanges of question and answer into each other's ears. But her final whisper was so soft, that, even so, he could hardly hear her.

"There can't . . . there won't be . . . anyone but us, ever, I mean, unless we could be properly married?"

He was ready to promise her anything she wished.

III.

BEECHCOMBE

1.

THE train had been very full, and even the orderly crowd which had been going to spend its day in the space and sunlight of the Chiltern Hills had shown its consciousness that this was the August Bank Holiday. There had been an air of anticipation and eagerness about them all, and their excitement had for the moment partly dominated their natural middle-class reserve. Even the two middle-aged young women who had at first attempted an appearance of detachment, had begun to talk to the other occupants of the compartment before they reached Chorley Wood. Everyone had essayed some embroidery of the satisfactory and conclusive statement that it was "perfect weather," and, failing to improve the effect by mere phrase, had fallen back upon presenting the contrast of earlier bank holidays they had known. Sometimes they so far lost themselves in reminiscence as to lose momentarily their sense of present enjoyment until recalled by a young man in the corner, who invariably wound up every such retrospect by saying cheerfully: "Well, it's all right to-day, anyhow." Betty had tried in vain to forget herself in this jolly atmosphere of pleased expectation. She felt miserably alone and apart from the happy crowd. She could not forget the cloud which hung over her, the dread of the future, the knowledge that she was purposing to do something which, as she phrased it, would cut her off for ever from all decent people.

Now that she was away from Jacob, she saw the problem so

clearly from the old point of view. She had always been taught to renounce the lusts of the flesh, and however remote was the clear purpose of her mind from any conception of lust, she saw but this one antithesis. That was the alternative which every relation or friend she had ever had would set up as the indisputable test. It was a choice between becoming the mistress of a married man and continuing the struggle of her ordinary life. They would tell her that she must "renounce," and no words of hers could ever make plain to them that to do what they would call the immoral thing needed the greater courage, was the greater act of renunciation. That was a perfectly clear issue she could never make these relations of hers understand, and it seemed to her that surely the mass of opinion must be right, and that all Jacob's argument must be one elusive sophistry—Jesuitical was her only word for it—but her intention was the same. Jacob had his own purpose to serve; her father and sisters would be comparatively detached in giving their advice. Nevertheless, she did not esteem Jacob's purpose as any less worthy than her own. He loved her, and she did not doubt the quality of his love.

And that one warm thought brought the only glow of comfort and happiness which upheld her in her distress—she was loved for the first time in her life, and the fact had altered her relations even to the commonplace circumstances of existence. To-day she had not been offended by the mute admiration of the unattached optimist who had returned so persistently to his reminder of present serenity. His surreptitious glances had been a cause of interest, whereas six months ago they would have seemed to her offensive. She was newly awake to an aspect of life she had never before understood. She saw how universal and immensely important was this strange stimulus which she had so persistently misread.

As she walked slowly up the long steep hill from the station, she felt that she was not the same person who had so often traversed that familiar road. She remembered how she had first been brought to see the wonder of the new station at

Great Missenden, and had been slightly intimidated by her sight of the enormous, noisy train. But that childish figure with the loose mane of fair hair was less remote from her present self than her vision of the sedate young woman returning to Bloomsbury just a year ago, the Betty who had reproved her younger sister for "larking" with the curate. She had said it was not "nice," and at Hilda's retort had warmed to the insult that it was "so common."

Yet here was this same Betty secretly unashamed of the knowledge that she was wooed by a man who had a wife living, a Betty who had been interested in the bashful admiration of a young bank-holiday clerk.

Even when she had reached the plateau, and was making her way along the dull straight mile of straggling village, subject to constant recognition by her father's parishioners, some of whom complimented her on her appearance and lamented that she never came to see them now, even then, in the midst of the familiar associations which had made up the greater part of her life, she was intensely conscious of the new, strange spirit within her. "If you only knew," she thought, "I wonder whether you would care to speak to me at all." In imagination she saw the leers and winks which would be exchanged after her back was turned; she heard the gossip: "She's no better than she should be."

2.

When she reached the Rectory gate, the sound of voices came to her from the lawn, and she stopped and listened, hidden from the speakers by the thick shrubbery of laurel which shielded the garden from the drive.

The voices were those of her two sisters. They were playing tennis, not very seriously, if Betty could judge by the comments they made on each other's play, but evidently with considerable animation. "Oh, Violet, you booby, fancy missing that!" she heard; and the reply: "Well, it's too hot to run. Go on; that's thirty-all, isn't it? You're in the wrong court, duffer!"

They had always been different from her, those two, less serious, less practical. She had always had some sense of superiority; she had been something more than an elder sister, her attitude towards them had been that of an older generation. She was only separated from Violet by three years, and from Hilda by five, but they had seemed to regard her as belonging to another set of interests. They had combined against her, like children with common delights of which she knew nothing.

But never had she felt so apart from them as now. Already she was cut off by interests so divergent that she felt like a stranger in this, the only home she had ever known. She was aware of a feeling of shyness, as if she intruded her presence on a strange family.

She drew herself up and walked quickly through the wire arch that gave access to the lawn.

"Hallo, you two!" was her greeting.

"Good Heavens! It's Betty!" exclaimed Violet. "Where on earth did you spring from? Got a holiday?"

And Hilda, on the far side of the net, opened her eyes to their widest, feigning extravagant and gawky surprise.

Their kisses were the most perfunctory acknowledgment of sisterhood, and when the three had sat down on the old garden-seat under the elms, their inquiries into Betty's news and her reasons for this unexpected visit displayed a lack of interest, that they made little attempt to disguise.

It was plain at once that they were bursting with some secret of their own. They exchanged glances, giggled, and Hilda constantly entreated Violet to "shut up!" although her tone and manner showed the delight she took in this, to Betty, meaningless badinage.

"Oh, come on," said Betty at last, "do tell me what you're giggling about?"

"Ask the kid," responded Violet.

"Look here, Vi, you'll have to drop calling me 'the kid' now," said Hilda, and smacked at her sister's foot with the tennis-racquet she was still holding.

"The kid's grown up now," explained Violet.

"Oh, shut up, old girl!" put in Hilda; "you needn't make a joke of it." Her tone was suddenly more serious.

"I wasn't making a joke of it, touchy," returned Violet. "Tell her yourself."

"Oh, I can't!" said Hilda, blushing furiously.

"Well, do one of you tell me," urged Betty. "She hasn't got engaged, has she?"

Violet nodded vehemently, and Hilda began to take an enormous interest in patting the gravel with her racquet.

"Who to?" asked Betty.

"Mr. Phelps: We call him Frank now," said Violet.

"But . . ." began Betty.

"He's got a living in Worcestershire," said Violet, anticipating her sister's objection. "Last week."

"Well, I think you might have written to me," expostulated Betty; and, turning to Hilda, she put an arm round her shoulders and said: "I'm awfully glad, old girl!"

"Thanks, dear, it is rather ripping," replied Hilda, without looking up from her work on the path.

"We haven't had time to write," explained Violet. "It only happened last night. After supper. They went out to look at the moon or something, and then Frank came back looking as if he'd just come down from Mount Sinai . . ."

"Oh, shut up, Vi!" interpolated Hilda.

"And after prayers he told father that he and Hilda were engaged, and was father prepared to give them his blessing?"

"When is it going to be?" asked Betty.

"I don't know," said Hilda, still intent on spoiling her racquet. "Ages yet, I expect."

"What bosh!" said Violet. "It's going to be pretty soon. Frank's going to be inducted in September, and he told father that he doesn't see any reason why it shouldn't be in October. Hilda's twenty-one. It'll be jolly rotten for me after she's gone," Violet went on. "Father's been talking this morning about *your* coming back, Betty. Funny your turning up like this. I don't know whether he really meant it, though. Aunt Mary's here. She came down for the holidays, and perhaps she'll come for good." Violet's tone did not indicate

which of the two evils she would dislike more—the return of her sister or the permanent residence of Aunt Mary.

Betty drew her own inferences, and determined that nothing should ever induce her to return to the Rectory as house-keeper and chaperone ; but she avoided any comment on that issue by asking :

“ Will Mr. Phelps be here to lunch ? ”

“ No, he’s gone down to see his own people and spread the glad tidings,” said Violet.

“ Oh, come on ! ” said Hilda, getting to her feet. “ Aren’t you going in to see father, Bet ? He’s in his study, I expect.”

“ All right,” said Betty. “ Go and tell him I’m here. I’ll come directly. I’ve hardly got cool yet after that walk from the station.”

“ We’d have met you if you’d let us know,” said Violet.

“ I didn’t know myself till this morning,” replied Betty.

“ I didn’t want to wire. A two-mile walk won’t kill me.”

She watched her two sisters move away across the lawn locked in a school-girl embrace. They were curiously young, she thought. Hilda was not unlike herself in appearance, fair and blue-eyed, but Hilda was taller and slighter. Violet, dark and noticeably thin, was unlike either of them.

When they had passed out of sight round the corner of the house, Betty’s thoughts turned to the contemplation of the coming interview with her father. Dare she tell him, she wondered, and then, *ought* she to tell him ? There was Hilda to be considered, and Violet, her father, Aunt Mary, the family generally, and, incidentally, Mr. Phelps. (Betty remembered him as a rather commonplace young man, with a thick, fair moustache, whose chief characteristics were a conscientious interest in the parish and a passion for fishing.) How could she spring a terrible scandal on this composed, convinced group of people ? They had only one standard of propriety and ethics, and it was her own standard. She recalled the last serious interview she had had with her father, when she had faced him in his study and declared her intention of earning her own living. He had been shocked then. Her intention had evidently appeared to him as not quite “ seemly ”—his

own word, to which he had reverted more than once in the course of their argument. He had confessed that he was unable to see his daughter's point of view.

But on that occasion she had had sound and convincing reasons to adduce for her proposal. The economic point was too good to be passed by. "I don't suppose I shall ever marry," she had said; "I don't think I'm that sort, and I feel I ought to begin to do something now . . ." She had hesitated to make a complete statement, but her father had understood.

"Of course, of course," he had said, "I quite see your point, my dear girl. If anything happens to me, as it inevitably will in God's good time, it may become necessary for you to support yourself—but . . ." He had hesitated, and looked past Betty at the bookcase with a certain wrinkling of the forehead she knew so well. "But Mrs. Parmenter—a dear, good creature, of course, and very worthy—her husband, I'm afraid, was a blackguard—still she's not—er—quite one of us, you know, my dear, and . . . do you really think a boarding-house, eh?"

"It's a chance," Betty had replied stubbornly, without touching on the subsidiary question, "and chances aren't easy to find."

He had given in on that occasion, but she could not doubt that he had clearly recognised his own interests. Betty's departure would reduce household expenses. And his final display of temper was, almost certainly, a mark of his weakness. He had been angry with her for putting the temptation to selfishness before him.

There had been an excuse for her then; there was none now. And would not Jacob Stahl, from her description of him, most surely rank with Mrs. Parmenter as "not—er—quite one of us, you know"?

Betty grew suddenly warm at the thought of that expression. If it came to a championship of Jacob, she would be quite equal to the occasion.

"I *am* a coward," she reflected. "I don't believe I can ever face telling them." It was certainly a consolation to feel

that duty and inclination coincided. "In any case, I can't say anything about it until Hilda is married," was her final decision, and she got up from the seat with a very real sense of relief.

After that decision the interview had no longer any terrors for her, but as she walked towards the house, Hilda and Violet returned to say that their father and Aunt Mary had gone out into the parish, so she resumed her seat and watched her two sisters finish their interrupted set.

3.

Her father's greeting was warmer than she had anticipated, and his grievance that she had not been down to see them for so long wore an aspect of paternal tenderness. Aunt Mary was quite effusive, but that was to be expected. She was a warm-hearted, generous little woman, and lived her religion with a sincerity that was often embarrassing.

The old familiar influences were taking hold of Betty, drawing her back to the comfort and serenity of this country Rectory. The dining-room had a certain solid dignity of its own, despite the shabbiness of some of the furniture, and there was a feeling of assurance, of position, in the whole air of the place, which strongly appealed to her after twelve months in a Bloomsbury boarding-house. She found herself wondering, in face of her recent determination, whether it would not be possible for her to return and live the old life again? Without question that would be the line of least resistance.

The contrast between her two lives was brought home to her by Aunt Mary's persistent inquiries about the house in Montague Place.

"Do you have family prayers, dear?" the good lady asked. "I *do* think it is so essential that we should unite in common worship at least once every day."

Betty thought of the "German young gentlemen," of Mrs. Blakey, and her agnostic lover, Jacob, uniting in common worship, and that incredible idea made her smile; but she could not refrain from asking herself why it should be so

absurd. She believed, theoretically, in the truth of her aunt's standard. Why did she not practise her beliefs ?

"I'm afraid we don't, aunt," was all the answer she could find.

Aunt Mary looked grieved. "There is a terrible tendency towards carelessness in these days," she said. "It is so sad. The spirit of Anti-Christ is spreading everywhere, one of the signs of the last days, as we are told."

"It's a little difficult, no doubt, in a boarding-house, Mary," the Rector suggested. "Irregularity of times, I expect, and so forth. Young men hurrying off to business in the morning, eh, Betty ? and—er—perhaps some differences of creed, no doubt, among your boarders ?"

"Oh yes, of course, father," answered Betty, glad of an escape.

Mrs. Lynneker shook her head. "You've no Roman Catholics, I hope, dear ?" she asked.

"Oh no—at least I don't think so," replied Betty.

"I hope you will set your face against that, dear," said her aunt earnestly, with a note of reproof, which implied that her niece ought surely to know whether she harboured such dangerous guests ; and Betty tried to picture herself inquiring into the tenets of possible boarders. That Bloomsbury house was so impossibly far away, and the Betty who worked there seemed to be quite another person to the Betty in the Rectory dining-room.

Mr. Gale saved further embarrassments by turning the conversation to the subject of the Great Central Railway. He announced that work was already beginning at the London terminus, and that the line was to pass under Lord's Cricket Ground.

"It will probably make a great difference to us down here," he said. "The Metropolitan has changed the country a great deal. When we first came here our nearest station was High Wycombe, and Beechcombe was buried in the heart of the Chilterns. A great pity in some ways that the country should be lost to us. London is a terrible monster, always hungry for more land. I suppose you noticed, Betty, the new houses

that are going up in the village ? We are becoming terribly urbanised. A great pity, in my opinion."

"I don't think I noticed the houses, father," said Betty ; but she did notice, in her practical way, many defects in the conduct of the Rectory *ménage*, particularly in the cooking and serving of the lunch. She made no comment, but she looked once or twice at Violet, who seemed to avoid her sister's glance.

"I'd soon alter that, if I came back," was Betty's unspoken thought, with reference to household management.

And after lunch, when her father took Betty off by herself to the far end of the garden, he made it quite clear to her that he also appreciated the difference in the conduct of his household.

"And is this boarding-house a success, eh, dear ?" he asked.

"Well, I don't know that we are making much money yet," replied Betty. "We were rather empty in the early spring, and we have not been very full since the Jubilee. But people will be coming back soon. Oh yes, I think it will be a success."

"Ah !" Mr. Gale gave full value to his exclamations ; they were sonorous, and slightly prolonged. "Did the girls say anything to you about coming back here after Hilda's marriage ? A good fellow, Phelps, by the way. Not brilliant, perhaps, but a thoroughly good fellow."

"They did mention it," said Betty, keeping to the main issue.

"I need hardly say, of course," said her father, "how glad I should be if you saw your way to return, my dear. Violet does her best, but she lacks that splendid quality of thoroughness that my little Betty displays so markedly. You're a wonderful little housekeeper, my dear ; I'm sure if anyone could make a boarding-house a success . . . Well, well, I hope you'll think it over. Your aunt has offered to come, if necessary, although I know she prefers Bournemouth. She finds our air a little too strong for her, I fancy. And I may tell you that she, too, is a little against your remaining on in Bloomsbury indefinitely. She has told me that neither you

nor Violet need have any—er—fears for the future, so you need not let those practical considerations stand in your way any longer. Such a very practical little woman is my dear Betty, eh ?”

“I don’t think I could leave Mrs. Parmenter just yet,” faltered Betty. Her father was making it very difficult for her. She had always had a great respect for him, but there was some quality of insincerity in the man that had stood between them. Betty liked and admired her father, but she had never been able to love him. She was conscious at this moment that a certain selfishness underlay his anxiety for her return.

“She’s not quite capable, perhaps, in your opinion, of conducting the house alone, eh ?” asked Mr. Gale.

“She’s getting very old,” replied Betty.

“Dear, dear, yes; I suppose she must be. Let me see . . .”

“Oh, she’s not much over sixty,” interposed Betty; “but she’s had rather a terrible life, hasn’t she ?”

“Yes, yes, of course,” said Mr. Gale. “Terrible fellow, George Parmenter; a blackguard, I’m sorely afraid.”

“And, in any case, I must find her another partner. It would only be fair, wouldn’t it ?” asked Betty, inspired to a line of defence which was greatly to influence her immediate future.

“I suppose one could advertise ?” suggested her father. “One seems able to do anything by advertisement in these days.”

“I suppose so,” agreed Betty.

“Well, well, the wedding won’t be until the end of October,” said Mr. Gale. “That gives you three months, my dear. I do not wish to influence you unduly, and I have a great admiration, a very great admiration, for your courage in embarking on this venture at all. Still, if you *can* see your way. . . . Your father would be very glad to have his practical little woman home again, I assure you.”

He laid his hand caressingly on her shoulder, but Betty did not look up. . . .

Afterwards Aunt Mary questioned Betty very closely with regard to her Sunday observances. What church did she go

to ? Did she attend Communion regularly ? Aunt Mary was far more evangelical than her brother, who always described himself vaguely as a Broad Churchman.

Betty's answers to this searching examination were not altogether satisfactory, and she was ashamed to realise how far she had neglected her church-going. She went now and again to Evensong in Hart Street, but with those exceptions she had hardly been to church since she had left home. There was so much to do in the house.

She left her aunt in a very anxious frame of mind.

And through it all, Betty was conscious that she was being false to her family and false to herself. She was carrying about with her a thought which, if it had been expressed, would have startled these four people little less than the explosion of an infernal machine. She was, indeed, potentially an anarchist ! How much easier for her would be the way of virtue, the broad, plain road of convention !

4.

"We'll drive you to the station," said Violet, when Betty announced that it was necessary for her to catch the 8.11 back to Baker Street. "Tommy does not get half enough exercise."

"Tommy" was a stout, long-maned, little chestnut, safe to drive, but a pony of remarkable personality. His eccentricities were a staple of conversation at the Rectory. The three girls had always found him an excellent subject wherewith to entertain nervous strangers.

Betty remembered Hilda, the shy hoyden of four years earlier, blushing at the necessity to amuse some visitor at a Rectory garden-party. "Betty, what *am* I to talk about ?" she had asked ; and Betty had said : "Oh, tell them about Tommy."

The phrase had passed into use as one of the recognised family jokes, and when the three girls had started for the station in the little bandbox of a governess cart, it came as a shock to Betty to find that Violet was remembering a new

anecdote about the sturdy little eccentric, who was stepping out at the moment with such admirable determination.

Betty waited until the story was finished, and then said quietly: "Telling me about Tommy?"

"Oh, well . . ." began Violet on a note of excuse, but Hilda broke in quickly.

"It isn't that, old girl, really, only you have been away such a long time, haven't you? And we feel rather out of it about your boarding-house, and all that. You haven't been particularly confidential about your own affairs, have you?"

"You're not interested," returned Betty.

"We *are*," mumbled Violet.

"Rather—of course we are," supplemented Hilda. "Only I think you might make some allowances, just to-day, you know. Naturally, I'm a bit excited. . . ."

"And I'm as interested as I can be," said Betty; "but you haven't bothered to tell *me* much about Mr. Phelps, have you?"

"Well, you hardly know him, do you?" asked Hilda.

"I remember him quite well," said Betty.

"It's so difficult to talk to you about some things, Bet," complained Hilda, wrinkling her forehead in the manner of her father. "You always bossed us, you see, when you were at home."

"I didn't mean to," said Betty.

"And then . . ." began Hilda.

"What?" asked Betty.

"I don't know," returned Hilda.

Violet was apparently engrossed in her management of Tommy.

"And then . . . What?" repeated Betty.

"Well, we always feel that you're such a born old maid," said Violet, her gaze still intent on the broad expanse of Tommy's jogging back.

"Oh!" said Betty, and then she laughed—a laugh in which the bitterness was not entirely due to the cruelty of her sister's remark.

"Well, aren't you?" muttered Violet. "You've said so yourself, practically. Heaps of times. When you were going away you said you never meant to marry. Didn't you?"

"Did I? Very likely," said Betty. "Only isn't there rather a difference?"

"Don't get huffed, old girl," put in Hilda affectionately.

"I know I shall be twenty-seven next month," persisted Betty.

"Twenty-seven's young these days," said Hilda. "I shall be twenty-two in December, and Vi's twenty-five."

"Only just," interpolated Violet, and changed the conversation effectively by poking Tommy with the whip-handle.

Tommy immediately stopped dead.

"Oh, Vi, you *are* an idiot! You know he won't stand that," protested Hilda. "Now we shall never get him to start again, and Betty'll miss her train."

It did, as a matter of fact, take them several minutes to pacify the insulted Tommy, and induce him to resume the even tenor of his way to the station; and half-way down the hill, which Tommy always took seriously and exceedingly slowly, Betty suggested that she had better get out and run.

"It must be ten past now," she said.

"I'll go with you," said Hilda, "and Vi can come on. I expect the train'll be late."

There was a hurried exchange of kisses between the two elder sisters—"in case," as they said.

But when Hilda and Betty arrived at the station they found that they had plenty of time, and when presently Tommy had ambled complacently into the yard, the three sisters made their way together to the front of the platform to await the overdue train.

There was quite a crowd in the station, and Betty recognised, with a curious sense of familiarity, the young optimist who had travelled in the same compartment with her coming down. He was looking very sunburnt, his face inflamed to a high, rich red. No doubt he had exposed himself to the sun with the deliberate intention of getting as brown as possible in the time. And if Betty could judge by his expression, he

was very well satisfied with the result he had obtained. She turned her eyes away quickly, afraid that he might claim her acquaintance.

"How that hot-looking person stared!" Hilda remarked, when they came out of earshot.

"Not at you, though," thought Betty, with a gleam of satisfaction; but she made no comment. They might think she was a "born old maid" if they liked. Perhaps it was better that they should.

The train came in at last.

Hilda was effusive over her good-byes.

"You'll come and stay with us later. You know? In Worcestershire?" she said shyly.

Betty nodded. That invitation hurt her more than Violet's coldness.

5.

The early stages of Betty's journey back to town affected her in much the same way as her journey out. In the morning she had left Baker Street influenced by the familiar circumstance she was leaving behind, and she had looked forward with dread to the interview before her. Then it had seemed to her that her life in Bloomsbury was the essential thing; it had represented in some sense her standard of values. She came out of it for a moment only to return, as she supposed, unaffected by her brief absence.

Now she looked forward to her return to Montague Place with something of the same dread that she had felt in leaving. Eight hours at Beechcombe had revived so strongly all her original associations, that she could only regard the boarding-house as an alien and curiously inferior place. It represented drudgery and the fatigue of her common routine; it represented also the strife of her war with Jacob Stahl.

This contrast, however, was entirely superficial. She recognised how ephemeral was each influence, even as she wondered at the apparently powerful effect upon herself. "To-morrow," she thought, "I shall be back in the thick of it all again, and to-day will be like a sort of dream. And if I

went back home for good, I suppose I should soon find it difficult to believe I had ever been away."

And then, quite deliberately, she turned her thoughts to Jacob and to the future.

At first the issue was confused by all the conventions which ruled her. She could not disentangle her present and, possibly, future relations with Jacob from the influences of both Beechcombe and Bloomsbury. She was distracted by the individualities of the other people in the carriage. She could not help wondering, for instance, what that anæmic young wife with the two children would think of a woman, who ran away with a man who was not free to marry her?

That little, tired creature, whose lack of blood was merely emphasised by the flush of sunburn across her cheekbones, had her supreme ideal of respectability; all that was conveyed to her by the one miraculous word "marriage." She might be a failure, her husband might end his days in prison or the workhouse, her children might be rickety and consumptive, and live only long enough to pass on their weakness and disabilities to a third generation; the mother herself might be the worst of citizens, a slattern—she bore the marks already—feeble-willed, an evil influence on the character of her offspring, a woman who might sink into drunkenness, if she contrived to maintain sufficiently long her uncertain tenure of life. But, according to the amazing morality of her class, a morality that was no less Betty's own, this woman was essentially virtuous. That weedy-looking youth, her husband, had paid his necessary shillings to some authorised person, whether minister or registrar, and had obtained a certificate of virtue for himself and his wife. Henceforth they were licensed by the State, with the full approval of the Church, to indulge their desires and beget children. He might be a sensualist, and she a prostitute, living together without love, the man regarding the woman as a convenient outlet for his passion, the woman selling herself for the means of subsistence which he provided. No one knew, and no one cared. The only essential required of them was that they should spend ten minutes in making certain promises before

a properly constituted authority, and so could produce on demand the certificate which endorsed their entire respectability. Ethics and morality and the true understanding of love and duty weighed not a featherweight in the scale against that slip of paper. . . . Betty could not realise these things as yet, but dimly she became aware that this woman's censure was something of small account, that her life, however hallowed by a ten-minute ceremony, was open to criticism.

The couple got out at Harrow, but the compartment filled again at once, and this time Betty had a vision of how such marriages are sometimes made.

The young woman opposite to her was slightly dishevelled, and her companion looked tired and somewhat bored. He was self-conscious when the girl pressed her shoulder against him, and tried to keep possession of his loose-jointed, big-knuckled hand. He wore a faint air of being ashamed and sorry for his day's work, she of being proud and possessive. Almost Betty could hear her say: "You will marry me, won't you?" and his conscientious, yet too perfunctory, reply: "Of course I will." And he would, no one could doubt it. He, too, had his ideal of respectability, and no doubt his firm, arbiters of their employes' virtue, would regard with extreme disfavour an affiliation suit in some local police-court.

Betty pursed her lips and looked out of the window. She regarded with unseeing eyes the vision of shadows flying across the darkness; she was thinking of Jacob Stahl's love for herself. Was it not a true and wonderful thing, even if he could not face the great effort of renunciation? That, for him, would be the highest sacrifice. But for her, the final demand was to dare the scorn of Beechcombe, Bloomsbury, and those couples in the railway-carriage. It seemed to her that this was the essential contrast between a man's love and a woman's.

And yet was not his love for her the greatest and most desirable thing in her life? Something cherished, which she had carried with her through every changing prospect of her day's experience? Bloomsbury and Beechcombe might wear this semblance or that, but her love for Jacob was the thread upon which all the circumstance of her life was now strung.

IV.

DECISION

1.

SHE found Jacob waiting for her at Baker Street Station. With a certain consideration for Mrs. Parmenter in her mind, Betty had asked him not to meet her. She had explained that it was impossible for her to say which train she would be able to catch. His coming put her in another of those false situations that were so irritating. She had intended to save Mrs. Parmenter from any further embarrassment, and now. . . . His first words aggravated the offence.

"How did you know which train I should come by?" she asked.

"I didn't," he said. "I've been here over an hour. I met the seven-fifty-something, and I was prepared to meet every train until midnight."

"You've been here over an hour?" she repeated, and added: "Did you tell Mrs. Parmenter you were coming?"

"Rather not," replied Jacob. "What business is it of hers? Besides, I've been out since two o'clock. It's been such a glorious afternoon."

"Of course she'll think we've been together all day," said Betty.

"Well, what if she does?" said Jacob. "Look here, can't we go and have supper somewhere? I want to hear all about it."

"Oh no! I must go straight back." Betty's tone was cold and determined. "My ticket takes me to Gower Street. We must go on by the Underground."

Jacob's face fell. "And when shall I have a minute to talk to you?" he asked. "I think you might guess how eager I am to hear about everything."

"Nothing happened," replied Betty. "Absolutely nothing. I didn't say a word to them about—about us. Besides," she went on quickly, seeing the frown of disapproval which greeted her announcement, "I shall be able to talk to you when we get back."

"You won't," returned Jacob. "The Blakey woman will be there, confound her! There was a telegram from her this morning. I suppose she's coming up by an excursion to save a shilling on her fare. She's a stingy old beast!"

"Goodness!" exclaimed Betty; "and her room won't be ready or anything. I must fly!"

She moved away quickly, but Jacob came after her and caught her arm.

"Betty!" he said, on a note of urgency.

"Oh! what is it?" she asked impatiently.

"No, you mustn't ask me like that. It's too important," he protested.

"I *must* go!" returned Betty, with even more impatience.

"Have you altered your mind?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No. Do let me go!" she said.

"Well, then, what does it matter if old Parmenter and one of the maids have to get Mrs. Blakey's room ready? Why must you be a slave?"

"I can't argue about it now. I must get back at once," was Betty's only defence.

He was suddenly resentful and angry. "Very well," he said viciously, "I've been on tenter-hooks all day, simply in agony to know what you've decided, and now the only thing that appears to you of the least consequence is that you should get Mrs. Blakey's room ready. There's a servant and Mrs. Parmenter to do it, but you consider this room of more importance than the whole of your future and mine. All right, you go on; I'm not coming."

He had her attention now. She turned and faced him in perplexity.

"Oh, don't let us quarrel in the station!" she pleaded. "And I've told you everything that matters. I've told you that I haven't said a word about us to anyone at home, and that I haven't changed my mind. What more is there?"

"All right, you can go on," said Jacob bitterly.

"What is the matter?" asked Betty.

"Many things."

"Do be sensible," she besought him.

"Will you come with me to supper somewhere and talk quietly?" he asked.

"I can't," said Betty. "You must see I can't."

"You can, but you're afraid," said Jacob. "You were afraid to tell your people to-day; you're afraid to upset Mrs. Parmenter; you're afraid of what Mrs. Blakey may say; you're afraid of every mortal thing; and yet you deceive yourself into the belief that somehow, most miraculously, you won't be afraid to snap your fingers at them all and come away with me. Fairly absurd, isn't it?"

"I've said I'd come," said Betty.

"Yes, and no doubt you think you mean it, but you don't," replied Jacob.

"It's no good arguing about it, is it?" she said. She was suddenly weak and unstrung. She was seized with a terrible doubt of herself. She wondered if all that Jacob had said were not perfectly true. She might make up her mind, but she had not the moral courage to face the actual situation. Yesterday she had not dared to make confession to Mrs. Parmenter; this morning she had eagerly welcomed the excuse which relieved her of the necessity to confide in her father; and now she was afraid of the disapproval of Mrs. Blakey and the boarders. That had not been in her thoughts when she had said she must hurry back to Montague Place. Her practical mind had instantly seized on her obvious duty, as she saw it, in the management of the boarding-house. But she was ready to admit now that she was forced to face the situation, that she was afraid of the strictures, spoken or unspoken, of Mrs. Parmenter and Mrs. Blakey.

"It's no good arguing about it," she repeated feebly.

"Not a bit," returned Jacob. "We've got to do things, not talk about them."

"We're going to," she urged.

"Well, put your courage to the test here and now," he said. "Hang the boarding-house and all the Parmenters and Blakeys, and come out with me to supper."

"Oh! but . . ." she began.

"Precisely," returned Jacob. "'But,' and then again 'but.' In other words, you're afraid."

She hesitated a moment, staring down at the platform, gently tapping her foot, and then she raised her head and looked at him. "Very well, dear," she said, "where shall we go? Only you mustn't be cross all the time."

"Oh, Betty!" said Jacob.

Regardless of the traffic of the station, he put his hands on her shoulders and gazed down into her eyes.

"Jimmy!" she protested, "everyone's staring at us."

He disregarded that. "No, you shan't come, dear," he said. "I was a brute to make you. We'll go back now, at once. I know it'll be all right now."

"Come along," said Betty, "we're going out to supper."

"Not if you don't want to," he protested.

"I do," she said.

2.

In one respect, at least, she had made up her mind. She must be left alone, uninfluenced. This was her own personal problem. Not Beechcombe, nor Bloomsbury, nor even Jacob must be allowed to dominate her. She must try, however ineffectually, to think everything out for herself, without pressure, without bullying. It had been her fate to be bullied, she thought. Her father, her sisters, Mrs. Parmenter, the boarders, Jacob, were always demanding something from her. All the life around her was insistently begging for help, and, whenever it had been possible, she had done her best to supply their needs. She was not rebellious against this call upon her. It appeared to her a natural and in many ways a pleasant thing. She loved to help and to give. But this new and

most urgent demand was of an entirely new kind. It divided her. She could not give to either side without taking from the other. She was becoming the rope of a tug of war. If Jacob pulled harder than the forces arrayed against him, he would win. She refused to be a rope. In this thing she must be the arbiter.

Jacob, recklessly, had driven her in a hansom to a little Italian restaurant in Holborn, near the mouth of the Gray's Inn Road. He knew the place well. To him it represented his feeble efforts at economy in the days when he had been writing advertisements at ten pounds a month, and had been gradually eating up his tiny capital. He thought this magnificently named "Firenze" restaurant would be quiet on a bank holiday. It was too far East for the crowd.

His forecast had been a correct one. The long, narrow, rather dirty rooms were almost empty, and he led Betty through the arch to the farthest of the little oblong marble tables, which, at this extremity, were not even covered by the coarse, spotted cloths which dignified the tables nearer the entrance.

"It's not much of a place," he whispered apologetically, one eye on the smiling padrone, "but I knew we should be quiet here."

"It's all right," Betty reassured him. "I don't want anything to eat."

It was true that she was not in the least inclined for food, but she always dreaded to eat in such restaurants as these. She had an expert analytical eye for the constituents of "made" dishes. Her experiences as a cook gave her too much knowledge in these matters.

"Coffee?" suggested Jacob.

She nodded.

"Bring us some coffee, Giuseppe," said Jacob, with a touch of self-consciousness. He wanted, foolishly, to apologise to the waiter for the smallness of the order, but he was consoled by the fact that Giuseppe remembered him as an old customer.

"But aren't *you* going to eat anything?" asked Betty.

"I had supper before I came away; but you've had nothing, I suppose, since lunch?"

"I don't want anything," replied Jacob.

Giuseppe put temptation before them in the shape of two small hard rolls and two thin little circles of butter when he brought the coffee.

Jacob ate part of his roll absent-mindedly, and then began to smoke.

"Well?" he said.

"I didn't say anything at home," said Betty, making the plunge, "because one of my sisters is going to be married in October, and . . . well, I can't say anything before then."

Jacob reflected for a moment. "You always sacrifice yourself," he said.

They sat facing each other across the narrow marble slab, figured in one place by the pencil account of a domino score. They had to talk in low voices by reason of the not very distant presence of the padrone, whose box under the arch overlooked both his magnificent rooms. They did, indeed, appear quite magnificent to the padrone.

"I'm not going to spoil Hilda's chances," replied Betty, and set her lips firmly.

"I suppose it would do that?" asked Jacob.

"It might," she said.

"The man she's engaged to might want to back out if he knew?"

"He might. He's in the Church."

"Oh, the wonderful charity of the Church!" commented Jacob.

"We needn't quarrel about that," said Betty.

"Oh, Lord, no!" he replied.

For a few seconds they were silent, and then Jacob said:

"Well, it means postponement, does it?"

"Yes, for a little time," said Betty. "And, Jimmy, there's one other thing: I must find Mrs. Parmenter another partner before I come away."

"I see," replied Jacob.

Betty wondered at his sudden docility, and doubted the

quality of it. She looked at him a little anxiously, trying to read his mood.

He was apparently intent on the domino score made on a conveniently white streak in the veining of the marble. He took out a pencil and drew a ring round the group of figures, and then began to black in the circle with elaborate precision.

"What *are* you doing, dear?" asked Betty.

"Nothing," returned Jacob. "Thinking."

"I couldn't leave Mrs. Parmenter all alone there," said Betty, desperately. "I couldn't have that on my conscience. She might die, or go bankrupt, and then I should never forgive myself."

"Quite," murmured Jacob.

"Oh! what is the matter?" pleaded Betty. "Do be sensible."

"I'm going to be," replied Jacob. He lifted his head and looked into her eyes. "I'm going to be," he repeated. "Quite sensible. I'm a little bit done just now, I think. Beaten. It's an admission of weakness, I know, but you've been too strong for me. You've been so elusive. And now you've got all the best of the argument, and I feel that I can't go over all the old ground again. I'm too tired, for one thing."

He paused for a moment, watching the trouble in Betty's eyes, and then he went on: "It seems that I've got to wait, anyway. I've got to go away and leave you to look at things quietly. Two months, three months, till your sister's married, and you've found another partner for old Parmenter. It's all perfectly sensible and reasonable. I see that, and I give in absolutely. I'll write to Meredith and find out about rooms or something. . . . I wonder whether I shall ever see you again?"

"Oh, Jimmy!" expostulated Betty.

"Why?" he asked. "I'm being 'good,' aren't I?"

Betty wrinkled her forehead and looked past him at a coloured advertisement of somebody's sauce that hung on the wall behind him. She was vividly conscious of the nature of the sauce; the graphic representation of the bottle which

contained it brought before her the atmosphere of the Montague Place kitchen. She thought quite distinctly that she could smell it.

"I don't know what to do," she said petulantly.

Jacob leaned over the table and took her hand. "But, Betty, dear," he said, "it's all so easy now. I'm complacent. I've given in, really I have. I mean it. I'll wait."

"Oh, I can't let you go away like that!" said Betty.

"Would you sooner I went in a temper?"

"I don't want you to go away at all," said Betty. She drew her hand away from him and covered her eyes. Life was so impossibly difficult.

"But I must," continued Jacob relentlessly. "Neither you nor I could stand three more months of this sort of thing. You must see that." He looked at her, but her hands were still over her eyes, and she made no response.

"You do see that, don't you?" he urged.

She dropped her hands on the table and looked at him. "Oh, I'll come!" she said. "What does it matter? Let's go to-night, at once. I'll come back with you and get my things, and we'll go to an hotel to-night, and to Cornwall by the first train to-morrow. Only we must get it over at once."

In his mind, Jacob hesitated. Outwardly he gave no sign of his uncertainty, but a picture of taking Betty instantly away with him presented itself as a thing exquisitely attractive. Yet even as his desire for that accomplishment leapt into life, he saw with even greater distinctness a picture of an unwilling Betty, burdened with remorse and regret. He saw her miserable and fearful, depressed and ashamed. She would come to hate him as the cause of her unhappiness. That was not the thing he desired; no satisfaction could come by that road.

His hesitation was so slight that Betty, strung up momentarily to the thought of an instant purpose which would leave all doubts behind her, did not notice his pause. She was hardly thinking of him. She was concentrating all her energies to maintain the strength of her resolution.

"What a dear you are!" said Jacob. "I know you'd sacrifice yourself, but it won't do."

"Why not?" she asked, with a touch of asperity. "Will nothing satisfy you?"

He smiled grimly. "I'm afraid I'm rather difficult," he said. "But, darling, don't think I'm cross or anything; really I'm not. It's only that I see so clearly that you'd be miserable."

"What does that matter?" she asked. "I shall be miserable in any case."

He shook his head. "No you won't," he said. "It'll be all right. I'll go away for three months, and leave you to think it over and find a new partner for the boarding-house. I shall write to you, of course, but not miserable letters. . . ."

"But I don't want you to go away," she interrupted.

"Oh, it'll be all right," was all the answer he could find.

"Jimmy," said Betty, on an urgent note, "you believe that I will come at the end of three months?"

"Yes, of course," he said.

The see-saw which had swung so vainly and so unceasingly for forty-eight hours, was still tilting aimlessly up and down. At her hint of agreement he was on the ground again, doubting. When she was willing, he opposed her; when she agreed to a parting, he desired fiercely to wring from her again another admission that she would come with him at once if he willed it.

But even as he realised this alternation, he saw clearly—perhaps for the first time—the utter futility of their unending strife. He saw, too, that it must end in disgust. They would come to hate each other. He must be strong now, resolute, inflexible. His mind had accepted the necessity for a truce, and he must abide by that. It was a temporary solution, but the only one.

"Yes, yes, dear, I'm sure you will," he said. "We'll count it as settled, agreed upon. I do see your argument. It'll be all right. I'll go away for three months."

They were both conscious of relief.

"It *will* be all right, dear," she said, and gave him her

hand again across the table, without any thought of Giuseppe hovering in the background.

And then she spoilt it all by adding: "And perhaps something might happen . . ."

He understood the reference. They had avoided open mention of the possibility that his wife might die, but the thought of it, he knew, had been sometimes on Betty's mind as a miraculous solution.

"Oh no, darling," he said, "don't think of it in that way! Face it all in the next three months. Don't hope for miracles. Don't even think of them. It's just the whole essence of the thing that you must come, because you know that it's the sensible thing to do."

She nodded and sighed.

The cloud hung, imminent once more, but he dissolved it by an effort of will.

"Don't sigh, dear," he said manfully. "You'll see things more clearly when I'm gone." And mentally he was doubting the strength of her resolution while he held on to his own. He had even a sense of being uplifted. He had been strong, after all, he thought, self-sacrificing, magnanimous. . . .

"Do not see you vair often now," remarked Giuseppe, as he smilingly accepted a too-generous tip—Jacob's indulgence to his own self-esteem, the bill had been so ridiculously small.

"No. And you won't see me again for goodness knows how long," returned Jacob. "I'm going away—to Cornwall."

"To Cornwall!" repeated Giuseppe, with the necessary show of astonishment, although he had no idea where Cornwall might be.

The padrone bowed them out as if they had made his fortune.

3.

They were almost cheerful as they walked home together.

Betty was so conscious of her present integrity that she had forgotten her qualms about the arrangements for Mrs. Blakey's reception. Betty saw only the prospect of three months' energy before her, the kind of energy which she could

expend without effort. She would find a new partner who would be capable of running the place efficiently, and she would work up "the place" itself into a valuable property. September was a splendid month for getting new boarders. She would advertise in the *Daily Telegraph*. She would spend all the little capital left to her, some fifty pounds or so, in providing for Mrs. Parmenter's future welfare.

She spoke of her plans to Jacob as they walked, and he listened and made suggestions. He was still upheld by the glow of approval he felt for his own decision. For him there should be no backsliding or hint of return. He was weak in many ways—he saw himself so plainly to-night—but he was gaining strength. He would work desperately hard at that novel of his in Cornwall. . . .

4.

And, indeed, their resolution and agreement held during the week that followed. A stillness had fallen upon them, and when they were alone together, they spoke quietly of their separate determinations to work during the months that were coming. Beyond that interval they hardly dared to peer. A certain peace had come to them. For the moment both were content to wait.

Meredith, Jacob's friend, had risen to the occasion. There was a house, he wrote, at Trevarrian, in North Cornwall, which had not been let all the summer. It was a fair-sized place, and generally commanded a high rent during the holiday season; but the owner, who was the principal farmer in the village, had been unlucky this year, and would be glad to take ten shillings a week for the autumn and winter. Meredith offered to make arrangements. He was living at Porth, some three miles away, and had walked over and seen the farmer.

To Jacob and Betty the opportunity seemed a good one, but she was a little doubtful whether she approved the idea of his living all alone in that "fair-sized" house.

"Of course, I shall get some woman to cook for me, and wash up, and that kind of thing," explained Jacob.

"Well, of course," said Betty, with a smile.

"Meredith doesn't," returned Jacob. "He does every blessed thing for himself."

"I wonder what sort of a mess he makes of it?" mused Betty, with pity.

"You don't think men can do anything for themselves?"

"Not of that sort," replied Betty, and looked at him with a sudden tenderness.

"Oh, well, I admit I'm not good at it," said Jacob; "but I shall manage all right with a woman from the village. There is a little village of about ten houses there, Meredith says."

"Won't you be horribly lonely?" asked Betty.

"Of course I shall," said Jacob, and trenched on forbidden ground by adding: "But I shall know that it will only be for three months."

"Yes, it will only be for three months," agreed Betty. She tried to put enthusiasm into her acknowledgment, and did at least succeed in deceiving him, for he looked at her with fond and grateful eyes. But she had seen at that moment, with some return of the old pain, that she would be finally committed by this agreement, pledged beyond all hope of escape. If she did not go at the end of three months, what would become of him? She never conceived the possibility that *he* would change—that separation would affect his feeling for her. It might have been better for Jacob if he had been less devoted at times. If she had been less sure of him, she might earlier have realised the wonderful quality of her feeling for him.

5.

One concession she made, at which Jacob fondly grasped as if it were some kind of definite endorsement to their agreement. She allowed him to buy a wedding-ring for her to wear when she came to Trevarrian. She even permitted him to put it on her finger when they were alone in the drawing-room that evening.

"You're full of contradictions, you know," she said, as she

looked down at her hand; and then she frowned, and almost hastily took off the ring.

"I don't see why," Jacob said.

"One minute you don't believe in marriage at all," she said, "and the next—well, you buy this."

"It's only a symbol," he explained. "And if I don't believe in marriage in theory, I may believe in the practice, in certain circumstances. You know that I would put any belief of mine on one side to make you happy. You know that I would marry you if I could."

She had it in her mind to say that his beliefs accorded with his desires on occasion, but she did not want to stir up again the old controversy, so she nodded and said quietly, "Oh yes, I know," as she gave back the ring to him.

"Won't you keep it?" he asked.

"Oh no, you must keep it," she said.

After that he kept it in his pocket, and looked at it many times a day. He found some feeling of certainty in the sight of that pledge. She would never have allowed him to buy it if she had not meant to keep her promise, he thought.

6.

And she gave him a more faithful sign of that true feeling of hers when the actual parting came.

During all those months in Montague Place Jacob had been looking eagerly for some such sign as this; never had he felt sure of her love for him. That had been his tragedy through life, he believed: he had never been able to inspire lasting affection. Both his first love and the woman he had married had failed him; neither had been able to give him that strong and enduring affection he so earnestly desired. He found the fault in himself. He was too weak, he believed, and too eager for love. He was still influenced by the romantic conceptions of the Victorian novel. He saw the ideal of the woman as the strong, masterful male of sentimental fiction, and had not realised that everyone may find his complement, and that woman is certainly not less various than man. And

through all this affair with Betty he had been the aggressor, although his attack had been carried on by pleading and the admission of weakness. Not once had she met him quite half-way. Little wonder, then, that he doubted if here, at last, was the ideal for which he had lived, or that he was inclined to self-pity for his constant failure to win love.

Yet, at the last, he hoped.

Their farewell was made, compromisingly and most uncomfortably, in the tiny lobby which separated the coaches of the corridor train. He had marked his seat in a smoking-compartment by depositing book, hat, umbrella, and hand-bag; and now they had sought this little eddy, where, in the brief intervals between the passage of travellers and porters, they might snatch an instant's solitude.

Jacob was faintly elated by this embarkation on adventure, a little distracted by the stir of life about him; and it was Betty who took the initiative for the first time, and showed that she was the more single-minded of the two.

She took him by the arm, almost roughly, and snatched his attention from the bustle of the train. "Oh, you *will* take care of yourself, won't you?" she asked passionately.

"Take care of myself? Oh yes, of course," he said. Then he saw that she was crying.

"Betty," he said, "do you really care so much?"

She clung to him then, unheeding. "I *will* come!" she said; "I *will* come! Do look after yourself properly. Don't go playing about on the cliffs, or taking any risks."

"Not for three months, anyway," he replied.

"I shall be there to look after you then," said Betty. She was fumbling for a handkerchief.

And even the anti-climax that followed—as he tried to oust another passenger from a window in the corridor, and could only wave a miserable good-bye to the pathetic figure of Betty, standing lonely and apparently deserted on the platform—did not destroy the new hope and confidence which her whole-hearted protest had given him.

BOOK II
SEPARATION

V

POOR MRS. PARMENTER

1.

WHEN Jacob had gone, Betty found that the boarding-house in Montague Place had changed its character. It was thus that the phenomenon was presented to her; she did not realise that the change was solely in her own vision of the house, in all the thoughts that she brought to her knowledge of it. To her it seemed like a place newly whitewashed. It had a strange emptiness, and yet, despite its air of desertion and coldness, it held for her a promise of peace, the spiritual comfort of a place of worship. She turned to it with a sigh of resignation and relief as she had sometimes turned to a church service. Here she could find the comfort of easy relinquishment to a destiny that required from her no desperate opposition to the forces she had always regarded as her ethical guides. Her father, her aunt, her sisters, Mrs. Parmenter, even Mrs. Blakey, would all applaud her separation from Jacob, her choice of the plain, easy duty that was, they would tell her, so obviously right and good for her to choose. She had found a sanctuary, fleeing from life as a nun to her convent. Here she might follow the way of the Church in barren, satisfied self-approval.

Mrs. Parmenter confirmed that view of life the same afternoon when she came down to the drawing-room for tea. Mrs. Blakey, the only boarder then staying in the house who was ever in for that meal, had gone to tea with a friend.

Mrs. Parmenter, as was natural to her temperament, approached the topic openly, but with a certain characteristic obliqueness.

"I suppose Mr. Stoll won't get in till nearly dark," she began, and passed from that, momentarily, to a consideration of the many empty rooms in the house, and so finally to a consideration of Betty's future plans.

"I suppose you'll be hardly leaving here now, dear, for some long time to come?" she suggested, and only the faintest trembling of her head indicated her nervousness in approaching the central topic.

"Certainly not for at least three months," returned Betty, bravely indicating the proposed limit to her conventual distraction.

"Oh, well," said Mrs. Parmenter, with evident relief, "a lot may happen in three months. Maybe you'll both have changed your minds before then."

Betty, still poised, although wrapped for a moment in a feeling of comforting security, was uncertain whether the prospect was agreeable or not. "We may," she said tentatively.

Mrs. Parmenter carefully gathered up the corners of her outspread handkerchief and shook the crumbs it contained into the slop-basin. "It's wonderful what a difference it makes when you don't see each other for a while," she remarked. "Not, as I've always said, that I've anything against Mr. Stoll, only that under the circumstances it was better that he should go away just now."

"Well, he's gone," said Betty.

"And, of course, you'll please yourself as to when you'll see him again."

Betty nodded without much confidence. She was suddenly aware of her solitude. None of her acquaintances knew the facts, and there was no one in whom she could confide, to whom she could go for advice. Every member of that little circle about her would so inevitably be shocked and outraged, would so certainly say precisely the same things. She was shut into her convent, and must content herself within the limit of its consolations. She might as well expect to be encouraged in the utterance of blasphemy as in her feeling for Jacob Stahl.

"Although," continued Mrs. Parmenter, "I should be the last person to stand in your way, dear, if I thought you were going to make yourself any happier by marryin' him."

"I expect I shall, you know," put in Betty quickly. She felt that her escape was being out off, and that she must, with whatever important reservations, make it quite clear that this parting was not final.

Mrs. Parmenter firmly closed her eyes. She may have been praying for guidance, but if so none apparently was vouchsafed, for she took an undoubtedly weak line when, after a recognisable interval, she opened them again.

"Well, of course, you know best how you feel about it," she said, with a faint sniff of disapproval.

"Yes, I suppose I do," Betty replied; and anticipating any repetition of the futile objections she had already heard advanced by her partner, she got to her feet and packed the tea-tray.

"Alice can very well do that," remonstrated Mrs. Parmenter. She thought the present occasion peculiarly suitable for the discussion of the topic of Mr. Stahl. She was warmed now to speak her mind openly, and did not wish to lose the opportunity. There were times when she was a little afraid of Miss Betty Gale.

"Oh, Alice has quite enough to do," returned Betty. "Besides, I must go now to see about the dinner."

"Hadn't we better look out for another maid in place of Olive?" asked Mrs. Parmenter, feebly relinquishing her desire.

Betty wrinkled her forehead. "Not till the house is likely to fill up again," she said. "We can manage till then. Alice works a hundred times better now she's alone." She picked up the tray, and then stood for a moment with it in her hands, looking down at her partner.

"And it's really no use talking about it, you know," she said. "I've told you that it won't be for three months at least, and you needn't be afraid that I shall go off and leave you in the lurch. If I do go away any time, I shall find you another partner first."

Mrs. Parmenter appeared to be swallowing a belated crumb.

"It isn't that, my dear," she said. "I'm sure there's no reason why you should consider me. It's only . . ."

But Betty could not hear that. "Of course, there's every reason why I should consider you," she returned quickly. "I couldn't possibly go away and leave you here all alone, and I don't mean to. But please don't argue with me about it. It isn't any use, really." She took a step towards the door, and then, possessed by a sudden spirit of courage, she half turned and added: "If it were only a question of our not having enough money, I should go to-morrow."

Mrs. Parmenter did not understand, but in the moment that elapsed before she replied, Betty realised with a thrill of fear that she dare not burn her boats as yet. How could she stand three months' nagging? Moreover, Mrs. Parmenter, if she knew the truth, might consider it necessary to inform Beechcombe Rectory of its daughter's mad, immoral project, and then . . . Betty could have gasped with relief when her partner, evidently choosing her words with some deliberation, said:

"Well, no, perhaps not, dear; and I don't know that that is after all the *chief* objection. . . ."

She was going to say more, but Betty had no wish to hear any definition of that "chief objection," and cut it off at once by saying: "I must go and put the meat in, or it'll never be done by half-past seven." She might have added that it was hardly possible for her to discuss so desperate a subject while she stood in the middle of the room with a tea-tray in her hands.

"That was silly of me," she reflected as she went down into the kitchen, and sighed at the realisation, so plainly brought before her, that there was no one in whom she could confide.

Certainly the house was very empty, and it was haunted by the ghost of a departed Jacob. When her immediate occupation with the preparing of dinner was over, Betty went up to the second floor and looked at his deserted room.

"I will come, dear," she whispered to the spirit that lived there.

2.

But if Mrs. Parmenter's too obvious absorption in her own interests was an influence that might have played Jacob's game for him, and more subtly than he had played it for himself, other forces more than counterbalanced the effect of the old woman's selfishness. There was, for instance, the advice of Mrs. Blakey, at once shrewd and apparently disinterested.

Betty found her alone in the drawing-room one night some four or five days after Jacob had gone. It was after ten o'clock, and she was sipping her whisky-and-water in solitary state, evidently bored by her own company. She had, as usual, a book in her lap, but no one had ever seen her actually reading.

"Oh, come in, my dear, for charity's sake," she said, when Betty looked in to see if the room were empty. "Everyone's out or gone to bed, and I'm dying for someone to talk to."

"Even me," suggested Betty, as she accepted the invitation.

"You'll get no compliments from me," returned Mrs. Blakey with an assumption of asperity, "though I dare say you've been missing them the last few days, now that our Mr. Stahl has taken himself off to the seaside and left you in the lurch. But I suppose he'll be back again before long?"

"He didn't say anything about coming back," said Betty quietly. "I believe he's going to stay in Cornwall; anyway, for the winter."

"Dear, dear, what a tragedy!" said Mrs. Blakey briskly; "and soon there'll be nothing for it but double dummy with Mr. Franklin, I suppose?"

"Oh, I can come up and play when you want me," replied Betty. "There isn't very much for me to do just now while the house is so empty."

Mrs. Blakey made a noise that may be rendered as "Cht!"

Betty looked up and smiled.

"Oh, you needn't be afraid of an old woman's tongue," said Mrs. Blakey. "I can keep it still enough when I've a mind to. And I shan't be offended either if you don't want to

confide in me; you're a quiet little mouse at the best of times. But you needn't pretend, my dear, that I don't know all about it."

"There isn't anything to know," protested Betty.

"Quite enough," said Mrs. Blakey. "I fancy I shouldn't be far out, for instance, if I guessed that the young man we're talking about had asked you to spend the winter in Cornwall with him."

Betty blushed and a sudden doubt shook her. Had the shrewd Mrs. Blakey perhaps guessed also that there was some obstacle in the way? Her next speech brought reassurance.

"And perhaps I shouldn't be so very wrong either, if I said that he hasn't given up all hope of it yet," she continued. "But I think you're a wise young woman in persuading him to give you both time to think it over. I'm not one of those who're always saying 'Marry in haste and repent at leisure,' but you two have been cooped up in one house for the best part of a year, and you can't be expected to know your own minds till you've had a chance of seeing how you get on without each other."

"You think that he . . ." began Betty, admitting the accuracy of the general hypothesis.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I was thinking more about you, my dear," returned Mrs. Blakey; "for it seems to me that it's you that has the most to lose."

"Oh, it isn't that," interposed Betty.

"Ah yes, but it is just *that*," replied Mrs. Blakey, and took a quick sip of whisky-and-water. "It *is* that, because you're just one of those dear creatures who're ready to sacrifice themselves. Now, now, hear me out," she went on quickly, anticipating Betty's denial, "and give me credit for knowing something about the world after living in it for sixty-five years. What I mean, child, is that you're always looking after other people, and I wish there were more like you, and I've wondered sometimes whether you haven't been a little inclined to be too sorry for our Mr. Stahl. He's a nice young man—a little hasty-tempered sometimes, perhaps—and I like him, but he's got the sort of face that makes women want to take care of him."

He's come in here sometimes looking such a picture of loneliness that I've had a mind to kiss him myself just to cheer him up a bit; and I know well enough that you've often felt the same, and your kisses, I've no doubt, were much more effective than any of mine could have been. Only that isn't a safe ground for marriage, my dear. I don't say that you couldn't and wouldn't go on mothering him till the end of the chapter, but the time would come when he'd see through you, and want the sort of love you mightn't be able to give him. It may be so, I say, I don't know; but, if I were you, I should give myself a nice long, quiet time to think it over before you tie yourself up for life, and if you find that you're only sorry for him at the end of that time—well, if you'll take my advice, my dear, you won't marry him, for it won't lead to happiness for either of you. There now, I've made my throat dry by talking so much; I'll just have one little drop more of whisky, and then we'll go to bed."

And for a time Betty was inclined to attach some importance to that shrewd analysis of the situation. It had revived that wondering doubt of hers as to whether she were indeed in love with Jacob, or only sorry for him, and so gave her opportunity on that ground to defend her action, apart from any consideration of that wearing ethical question which so perplexed and harassed her. More than once, she almost decided that the three months they had agreed upon was altogether too short a period in which to test their feelings for one another.

She might have suffered something of a reaction if she could have heard a certain conversation between her partner and Mrs. Blakey on the following afternoon, but just at this time the accidents of life were tending to separate Betty and Jacob. It was as if the unknown arbiters of fate had grown tired of their effort, and, piqued and defeated, were endeavouring to undo their own work.

"I had a nice long talk with Miss Betty last night, my dear," Mrs. Blakey reported, "and I think I may pride myself that I did her a little good. To tell you the truth, dear, she's sorry for the man; so take my advice, and whenever you talk to her about him, don't go telling her she's unwise to think of

marrying him because they won't have enough to live on, for that's just the way to send her rushing off to see if he's drowned himself yet or not. She isn't in love with him yet, and the longer he's away the less she'll think of him ; so, if you take my advice, you'll say as little as maybe about him, and give her a chance to forget his pitying looks."

Mrs. Parmenter wagged her head and looked exceedingly wise.

Curiously enough, Jacob himself had never liked Mrs. Blakey.

3.

Another influence that tended to confirm Betty in her relative placidity during the weeks that followed was the contented tone of Jacob's letters. He seemed to be happy in his new surroundings. He wrote of his joy in the freedom of open country, of his delight in the sea. He displayed a new sense of optimism and of strength that was new to her. He told her that he was working well and steadily, that he had written three little sketches that had been accepted by the *Daily Post*—he asked her to look out for them—and that he was getting on splendidly with his novel; and in one letter, written at the end of September, he quoted with evident pride a note he had received from the editor of the *Daily Post*, expressing satisfaction with the work Jacob had done, and promising to send him more books for review. "I believe I shall really be able to save money down here," he concluded. "My total living expenses are under thirty shillings a week, and I'm making at least three pounds."

"He seems perfectly happy without me," Betty reflected ; but the thought brought to her no conviction of loneliness. She knew that he was trying to keep his promise, to leave her uninfluenced during those three months of probation, in order that she might finally act without persuasion. Moreover, although his letters spoke openly of his present contentment, were almost free from any phrase of endearment—he had settled down to a stereotyped opening in the form of "Betty, dear," a form that she copied in her replies—and made no

reference to her joining him at the beginning of November, she read clearly enough the spirit that informed his mood. It was all part of the assumption that he would no longer try to influence her; but his expectation was implicit in every line, and particularly plain, she thought, in his references to the saving of money. She could see him composing those letters with conscious determination to avoid the one issue that was ever present in his mind; she could hear him saying, "*I will be good*," as he had sometimes said it to her when her patience had been nearly worn out. And the inference composed her, permitted her to avoid for the moment the necessity of action. She found consolation in the thought that she need not make instant decision—it might quite well be, she thought, that the period of three months could be prolonged.

But in the first week of October, she was aroused from her brief complacency by her realisation of the fact that the boarding-house was once more full. While it had remained partly empty she could persuade herself that it was unreasonable to advertise for a partner to take her place, the conditions were unfavourable; but now she had no excuse for delay, and her innate honesty would not permit her to shirk any longer the fulfilment of her promise. She saw that she must either decide to give up any intention of joining Jacob Stahl in Cornwall, or make some preparation for taking that irrevocable step.

And at this critical moment of her hesitation she was suddenly helped on her appointed road by a letter from her father. The date of Hilda's wedding had been fixed for the twenty-eighth of October, he wrote; and after a few platitudes with reference to that event, he came to his real purpose in writing, by making a warm appeal in which he urged Betty to return and take up again the household cares of Beechcombe Rectory. The reason upon which he chiefly dwelt was that Betty was "rather out of her sphere" in Bloomsbury (she pursed her mouth at that); and he enclosed a letter from his sister, Mrs. Lynneker, temporarily returned to Bournemouth, a letter that explicitly stated the assurance already hinted, that neither Betty nor Violet need have any fear for the future so far as

money was concerned. Aunt Mary was evidently no less anxious than her brother that Betty should give up her boarding-house, and she wondered how far this anxiety was attributable to fear of the lax observances so clearly conveyed by her own admission two months ago. She smiled at the memory, while she appreciated the earnestness of her aunt's motives. Mrs. Lynneker, at least, had no personal intent to serve.

The first effect of these letters appeared to Betty as that of a further barrier building up between her and Jacob, but she recognised that a way had been opened for her to approach Mrs. Parmenter. The chief cause for hesitation, the assignment of a reason for breaking up the partnership, had been smoothed out; here was unassailable cause. Nevertheless, Betty suffered a twinge of conscience at the reflection that she was acting under false pretences.

4.

She opened the subject that same afternoon by producing her two letters.

"I want you to read these; I got them this morning," she said.

Mrs. Parmenter read them in trembling silence, and then, with dismay in her face, asked what Betty proposed to do.

"I thought of trying to find you another partner," Betty said.

Mrs. Parmenter folded her hands with the resignation of one confirmed in a disastrous premonition.

"I suppose it's what I might have expected," was how she phrased it.

"I don't think that's quite fair," remonstrated Betty.

Mrs. Parmenter misapplied that comment, adapting it to her own grievance. "One mustn't look for fairness in this world," she groaned, "and no one should know it better than me; but I'm getting a very old woman, and I've come to that time of life when I do look for a little consideration."

Betty pressed her lips together and looked out of the

window. "But I won't go," she said, after a short pause, "until I've found you another partner."

"Where?" snapped Mrs. Parmenter.

"I thought of advertising."

"And a nice lot of answers you'll get, no doubt," returned the older woman. "And the end of it'll be someone coming in to squeeze all she can out of the place, and then leaving me to manage as best I can. It's well enough for you, Elizabeth. As I see by your aunt's letter, you've no call to worry about the future; but it's different for me, left at my time of life to the mercy of strangers who'll only come here to rob me."

"Oh, come!" protested Betty. She was thinking that Mrs. Parmenter's arguments against that theoretical marriage with Jacob Stahl were shown to have been of remarkably small account. The old woman had only one interest to serve, and now that sophistry no longer availed her, she had shown her self-interest with astonishing clearness. Nevertheless, Betty was more influenced by this frank admission than she had been by any profession of disinterested advice. This new attitude was at least genuine, and she understood the old woman's fears and doubts for her future safety, and appreciated them at their full value.

"I think you might trust me to do more for you than that," she said. "You surely don't think that I would go off and leave you if I wasn't quite certain that we'd got someone we could trust to take my place."

Mrs. Parmenter began to cry. "How can anybody be certain of that?" she asked presently.

"Well, I won't go until you are satisfied," promised Betty in the eagerness of the moment, and instantly suffered a qualm of doubt if she had been wise in pledging herself so specifically. Beechcombe and her father could afford to wait for a year, if necessary, but she knew that Jacob would be less continent, and her partner might be hard to please.

Mrs. Parmenter grasped the advantage, even as she clung fondly to her grievance.

"Yes, you must promise me that, dear," she said, still making use, not without obvious reason, of her handkerchief, "though whoever it is you may get to come in your

place, it can't ever be the same as having you here." She gulped as a fresh outburst of tears overcame her; a stranger would have found the sight of her deeply affecting. "But if it must be," she continued, speaking in spasmodic gasps, "I suppose I must put up with it—though I did think that you were happy here. I'm sure I've done what I could. . . ." The thought of her own devotion overpowered her completely.

Betty fidgetted uneasily. She found that she had no argument to advance, no consolation to offer. She realised now, all too clearly, that she was playing a part.

"It isn't always a blessing to be too much wanted," she remarked inconsequently, with a thought of her own private trouble.

Mrs. Parmenter controlled herself sufficiently to take up that allusion. "Of course, I know that your father has the first claim on you," she said, sniffing violently, "and I should be the last one to stand in your way. It isn't to be expected that you'll have the comforts here that you're accustomed to at home, and I can't blame you for wanting to be at home again. No one knows better than I do all the troubles and worries of keeping a boarding-house."

"Oh, but it isn't that," Betty broke in. "You know it isn't that. I have been perfectly happy here. I don't want to go. At least . . ." She broke off, conscious that she was not being quite honest. There had been times when she had longed to leave Bloomsbury, and she knew that if that obstacle had not been interposed, she might have gone six months ago. But it was not the comfort of Beechcombe that tempted her.

"Well, there's your sister still there," explained Mrs. Parmenter, with a faint gleam of hope.

"It's partly on her account they want me," said Betty.

"And I should have thought your aunt, Mrs. Lynneker, might have kept house for them."

"The place doesn't suit her," returned Betty. "She's never well away from Bournemouth."

"Oh, it's always me that has to suffer!" said the old woman. "I'm sure I ought to be used to it by this time, I've had

enough of it." The stage of tears seemed to have passed, and left her in a mood of resentment.

"I don't see that you need suffer in any way," said Betty gently. "I expect I shall be able to find someone who'll be much more use than I am. It's a splendid time to look out, anyway, with the house full and all that."

"I don't take kindly to strangers—no one does at my age," was the last explicit objection to the proposed change, an objection of considerable weight, as Betty was soon to find.

But for the time the change was outwardly accepted by Mrs. Parmenter as being a part of the inevitable, perverse scheme of her tortured life.

Betty wrote Jacob the next day, and told him that she was advertising for someone to take her place in the boarding-house. She knew that she was pledging herself by making the announcement, but she was moved by a desire to test his response. He had been almost too self-contained in his recent letters.

The abounding enthusiasm of his reply left her in no doubt as to the intensity of his desire for her.

5.

He had so clearly permitted himself the relief of this one magnificat. His letter rang with the note of exultation, and yet he still refrained from pressing his advantage. He made his point unequivocally as if to hold what he had gained, but he pressed her no further.

She read the letter half a dozen times in the course of the morning, and something of her old dread and gloom returned. She could not relate herself to life. It came to her again that her very unselfishness had made her the tool of other people's comfort. Her father, Mrs. Parmenter, Jacob, were all bidding for her, and no plain way of self-sacrifice would solve her doubt. Whatever she did, two parties out of three must remain unsatisfied, probably resentful, blaming her for any decision she might make. She seemed so utterly alone, the sport of another's desire.

At first her natural inclination was to consider what action

of hers would cause the least distress to others, but while it appeared in this aspect that Jacob must certainly be sacrificed, she found a qualification in the fact that, while he was one against many, he would suffer more intensely than anyone of the circle of her relations, although she hesitated noticeably over her consideration of Aunt Mary Lynneker.

And it was the thought of this exception—curiously classed in Betty's mind with Jacob himself as one of the two people, who had varied in some inexplicable way from the general rule of her experience—that brought her back to that second test of courage which seemed in some ways so admirable. Weighed in that scale she was, as she frankly admitted to herself, a failure. Already she had shirked the plain issue. She had not dared to admit the true reason of her preparations for leaving Montague Place. She had all the support of worldly wisdom on her side. Mrs. Parmenter would have probably informed Beechcombe, and even if Betty had kept back the the one damning fact that Jacob Stahl had a wife living, she would have been pestered and besought to give him up. There would have been a fuss, an immense conflict. But she found no consolation in her regard of any conventional prudence. She saw it truly as casuistical, an excuse to defend her cowardice. The truth of the matter was that she could not face that immense conflict. More than that, she had moments when she realised why she was afraid, for she did herself the justice to admit that, never until this awful hesitation, had she lacked the courage of her opinions. She failed here because doubt was deeply rooted in her own mind. She could not defend her action to herself. All her training, all the influences and circumstances of her life, hedged her in and told her that the thing she proposed to do was a violation of the laws of God and man.

And yet in her heart some instinct, some fount of life that no training had been able to stifle, urged her forward on the forbidden path. She prayed long and shed many tears in the quiet of her own bedroom, but discovered no relief from her difficulty. Once she found herself quoting, "Father, remove this cup from me," and making application of the verse, was suddenly aghast at the sacrilege of her comparison. . . .

VI.

PARTNERS AND A PARTNERSHIP

1.

A TEMPORARY distraction from her intimate problem was provided by the difficult business of choosing a partner. She had had several answers to her advertisement in the *Daily Telegraph*, but had been forced to admit that none of the applicants were ideally suitable. The majority of them were decayed gentlewomen, eager to find some support for their declining years. They had neither money nor experience, nor, unless volubility could be counted an asset, any recommendations whatever for the management of a boarding-house. The small minority were more various, and one of them, a Mrs. Letchworth, had certain qualifications which seemed to Betty quite promising.

The refusal of this applicant clearly presented the crux which threatened to leave the problem permanently insoluble.

Mrs. Letchworth was a plump, active widow of forty or so, who was even then running a small boarding-house of her own in St. John's Wood, but was anxious to find a more promising sphere for the exercise of her talents. "St. John's Wood isn't the right part," she explained, "at least, my little place isn't. I haven't done so bad out of it, take it all round—anyway, I haven't lost any money, which is more than most of us can say, I fancy—but I want a bigger place for one thing, and I want to get more central."

She was distinctly practical in her suggestions, was willing to do a share of the cooking, and to bring in a hundred

pounds of capital on the condition that she had a full half share in the profits.

Betty judged her as eligible, but Mrs. Parmenter sat through the interview with an air of impenetrable gloom.

"I'm sorry, dear," she said, when Mrs. Letchworth had gone; "but, of course, she isn't a lady, and I'm sure we should never get on together."

Betty drummed her fingers on the table and reflected that this sort of thing might go on interminably.

"There'll always be something," she said.

Mrs. Parmenter gave indications of coming tears. "I'm sure I don't know what has set you against me," she said. "I've done everything I can; I've agreed to let you find me another partner, little as I like the idea of any stranger coming into the place; but I don't think you can expect me to take the very first that offers, especially someone not a lady like this one that's just been, who I never could take to, as you must very well know." Her voice quavered, and her head began to tremble violently.

"Oh, very well," returned Betty gently. "We'll put Mrs. Letchworth out of it, and I suppose I had better repeat the advertisement."

She sighed as she went out of the room, wondering if the ideal partner existed, and whether Mrs. Parmenter would accept her if she amazingly answered their advertisement.

Betty was inclined to consider the former speculation as the more probable of the two. Moreover, she was beginning to suspect a secret adversary in Mrs. Blakey, thereby adding another to the list of those who were working to serve their own ends, by keeping her back from the fulfilment of her destiny. Nevertheless, she found a certain grim consolation in the thought that the postponement of that destiny was being brought about through no fault of her own.

2.

The second advertisement brought fewer replies than the first. Indeed, the only possible partner, from a practical

point of view, was a tall, overbearing woman, who looked with disapproval on everything, and left Mrs. Parmenter in a state of nervous collapse.

Betty anticipated the inevitable on that occasion by an instant condemnation of the departed tyrant, and momentarily dispirited by the hopelessness of her task, she allowed three or four days to elapse before she made a further effort.

It was a letter from Jacob that stirred her to new exertion. The tone of it differed little from that of the majority of letters she had received from him, but he concluded by asking: "Have you been successful yet in finding a partner for old Parmenter? You didn't refer to that all-important question when you wrote last." Betty found something pathetic in the restraint of that simple question.

She answered it the same day, and told him some particulars of her failure; but she gave him no hint of Mrs. Parmenter's attitude, and explained that fresh advertisements on a somewhat grander scale were to be tried at once. And having thus made a new decision, she drafted a more elaborate prospectus of her requirements and despatched it to three papers, including this time the *Daily Post*, which she knew Jacob would see in Cornwall.

3.

Two days later, Alice announced that a lady was in the drawing-room and wished to see the proprietress.

Mrs. Parmenter always interviewed possible boarders, but Betty had arranged, for obvious reasons, to be present when a prospective partner was in question; and taking it for granted that this call was the first answer to her advertisement, she made a hasty toilet by discarding her overall, and went up to the drawing-room.

She liked the visitor at first sight. She saw in her some curious physical resemblance to herself, and inwardly she came to an instant decision that here, at last, was someone who would "have to do." Mrs. Parmenter's possible objections must be vigorously countered if, as Betty conjectured, those objections would still be forthcoming.

"I suppose you've seen our advertisement," was her opening, as she came into the room, and she looked a friendly approval of so promising an applicant.

The visitor smiled responsively. "No," she said, "I didn't. I just came on chance. I've been to two other places, but they didn't do at all."

Betty was puzzled. "But aren't you . . ." she began.

"Oh yes, I am," replied the other one at once. "At least, I'm looking for a boarding-house. This is a boarding-house, isn't it?"

"Yes, oh! yes, it is," Betty agreed on a note of disappointment. "You mean you are just looking for rooms?"

"You don't seem particularly pleased," laughed the visitor. "But perhaps you've nothing to do with the place. I asked for the proprietress, and I took it for granted . . ."

"I am the proprietress—one of them," put in Betty. "I'm sorry I made a mistake. I have been advertising for a partner, and I thought . . ."

"You thought I should do?"

"I'm sure you would splendidly."

"I'm so sorry. I think I should rather like to be your partner."

"That's nice of you," said Betty. "But, anyway, it isn't for me. You would have had to be my partner's partner, you see."

"Do you mean that you're giving it up?"

Betty nodded. "I want to," she said.

"Then I'm afraid we are both going to be disappointed," was the response. "For I thought what a delightful landlady you would be the moment you came into the room; and now . . ."

"I'm not going at once," said Betty, with a late recognition of the fact that one bedroom would be empty again at the end of the week. "In fact, I can't go until that real partner presents herself. When did you want to come?"

The visitor's face became suddenly grave. "There's something I want to tell you first," she said. "But perhaps you

will know my name. I'm called Mrs. Philip Laurence." She lifted her firm, round chin, and gave out the information with a touch of defiance.

Betty shook her head. "No, I don't know," she said. "Why do you say you're *called* Mrs. Philip Laurence?"

"Well, I'm not married, you see."

"Oh!" ejaculated Betty.

"I don't believe in marriage," Mrs. Laurence continued quietly. "And I've been living with Philip Laurence—he's the poet, you know, but I see you've never heard of him—for over two years now. And I won't go into any place under false pretences. But if you won't have me, I really think I must give up the idea of a boarding-house. The receptions I had at the other two places! You might have thought I was a desperate criminal."

Betty was thinking rapidly. She seemed to see in this quiet, resolute little woman a strangely altered version of the essential Betty Gale. Their spirits had touched from the first moment of meeting; a confidence had been established without the clumsy necessity for speech. And Betty, reaching out intuitively, had found a quick response, had felt even before she heard that declaration of independence from the bond of marriage, that she had found a friend who would understand her present difficulty.

"Oh, can't we come to some arrangement?" she asked in a tone of despair.

Mrs. Laurence smiled. "An arrangement?" she asked.

"I should so like you to stay here for a time," explained Betty eagerly. "It isn't that I want another boarder. We're really full up, all except one room that will be empty on Saturday. But Mrs. Parmenter—that's my partner—wouldn't have you if she knew; and, besides, there are other people here—a Mrs. Blakey, for instance—who would make it impossible. Must you tell everyone? Couldn't you just come in and say nothing about not being married? Is Mr. Laurence coming too? Would he mind?"

"Oh, he wouldn't mind. He would prefer it."

"But why, then?"

"I'm not ashamed of it," said Mrs. Laurence. "Why should I pretend?"

Betty wonderingly admired her courage. "It must be glorious to be so brave," she said, and went on quickly: "But there is a reason in this case, because if you won't pretend, you won't be able to come here, and then I shall lose you."

"Oh no, you won't do that in any case," said Mrs. Laurence, and drew her chair nearer to Betty's. "I felt that we were going to be friends directly you came in, and I felt, too, that I have known you for ever so long."

"Yes, I know," agreed Betty, and added: "but I've never felt like that with anyone before."

They dwelt on that fascinating topic for some minutes, before they returned to a discussion of the practical problem.

"As I said, Philip would sooner say nothing about it," Mrs. Laurence explained when they had come back to the question at issue. "He hates a fuss, and will say anything for the sake of peace. He can't write when he's worried, you see; but I've never done it, and it seems like the beginning of the end if you once start that sort of thing."

Betty wrinkled her forehead. "If you take rooms somewhere else, it's sure to be at the other end of London," she said, "and I can't get out much just now."

"But you're going away."

"It isn't settled," Betty said, with a faint show of confusion. "I want to talk to you about that sometime."

"Why not now?"

"We haven't time—at least, I haven't," was Betty's evasion. She felt that she could not open that curious page of her history quite so soon. She had shrunk from exhibiting it at Beechcombe, partly because she saw the impossibility of displaying by any words of hers Jacob's claim to recognition, his right to be judged and not condemned. And now she shrank from any hint of that enormous project for a reason that was strangely similar; she feared too ready encouragement, almost as she had feared instant reproof. Neither could satisfy her. She wanted to understand; she wanted advice that was unbiassed.

"Of course, you're awfully busy," said Mrs. Laurence, with a slight access of formality. "I've been so idle myself lately, one forgets." There was a touch of wistfulness in her acknowledgment, as if she deplored a forced inactivity.

"You don't look as if you were idle—ever," said Betty. "I don't believe you are."

"I've been on the stage, you see," Mrs. Laurence explained; "but I wasn't a success. And now I've really nothing to do just at present."

"But you are sure to find something soon," urged Betty, suddenly eager to play the part of a comforter. "You'll get another part, or something."

"I may," agreed the other, without enthusiasm. "But here I am still wasting your really valuable time . . ."

"It doesn't matter," put in Betty.

"But you said . . ."

"That I hadn't time for *that*. It's such a long story."

"Come and tell it to me this afternoon," Mrs. Laurence said, with a return to the old note of understanding. "We're in rooms at present, quite near here in Store Street, only they don't do very well—at all events, not for Philip. Do come, and we can talk everything over. If you come early, we shall be quite alone. Couldn't you?"

"Oh yes, I will—I should like to," replied Betty, without hesitation. "And perhaps I can persuade you to come here, after all."

Mrs. Laurence smiled and shook her head. "Not on your conditions," she said as she stood up. "You don't understand quite. I'll explain it all to you. Will you come soon after lunch? About half-past two?"

Betty said she would; but when her visitor had gone, she had a brief reaction. She wondered if she had been quite wise in offering so intimate a friendship. Why had she assumed so readily that this unknown Mrs. Philip Laurence, an actress living with a man who was not her husband, was a desirable friend, who might be made the first recipient of so delicate a confidence? She had been, in Betty's opinion, rather overdressed—that long fur coat she had been wearing was, to say the least of it, unseasonable.

4.

Betty's first sight of the Store Street apartments was hardly reassuring. The large sitting-room into which she was shown by the slatternly maid, displayed certain familiar indications of the cheap lodging. The shoddy furniture had so little relation to the generous proportions and high ceiling of the room itself, but seemed to stand self-consciously abashed by its surroundings.

Freda Laurence did not keep her visitor waiting. She came in at once through one of the great folding doors, that covered nearly the whole of one wall with their depressing waste of drab surface.

She was no longer overdressed; her fresh white blouse, with its crisp frilling at her rather short, round neck, the leather belt and plain serge skirt, gave her the air of a capable little business woman. Her manner added to the effect; she was brisk and practical. "How nice of you to come so early!" she said. "Now we'll have a real good talk."

Betty, shy and constrained, recognised in the other's attitude a different expression of her own nervousness. "She has something to hide," Betty thought. Her rapid criticism of the room, added to her observations of the morning, were suddenly summed up in the reflection that the Laurences had come down in the world.

Neither of them made any open confession of her embarrassment. They talked quickly, almost eagerly, on non-committal subjects for a time, chiefly on the subject of Freda Laurence's career as an actress—a career that had been confined almost exclusively to parts of secondary importance in Philip Laurence's blank verse plays.

"The stage isn't my vocation," was Freda's conclusion. "I can play a few comedy parts decently enough, but I'm too stocky for anything else. I shall probably be a tub at forty."

Betty shook her head. "It's not that sort of stockiness," she said; "and you're such a long way off forty that you needn't let it worry you yet, need you?"

"I'm twenty-two," returned Freda.

Betty had judged her older, but she made no comment, returning the confidence by saying, "I was twenty-seven last month."

Freda laughed. "You thought I was more than that, didn't you?" she asked. "I know I look more. . . ."

Betty hesitated, and then said honestly: "Yes, I thought you were about my age."

"I've put on five years in the last six months," said Freda; and then, to cover the gravity of her admission, she went on quickly: "but we won't talk about that, will we? You see, I can't very well just now; and besides, I do so want to hear all about you. I know you've got something to tell me. I saw it in your manner this morning, and it would be so splendid if we could be friends. I haven't any real friends."

The first stiffness of their meeting was being smoothed away. Betty's objective criticisms were being overruled by her intuitive feeling of sympathy for this girl who looked five years more than her age. There was so little of the actress about her, so much that was brave, courageous even, and honest.

"I think we might," agreed Betty, still a little shy. "I haven't any real friends either."

But when they had confided their Christian names to each other, and the pledge of friendship had been signed verbally and sealed with a kiss, Betty still hesitated to make full confession.

"I want you to tell me," she said, "why you haven't married Mr. Laurence. Is there any—any obstacle?"

"A big one," returned Freda, smiling; "but not of the sort you mean, I expect. We aren't either of us married already, for instance."

Betty looked puzzled. "But why, then . . .?" she began.

"Because I don't believe in it," Freda said; and her eyes grew a little hard, the set of her firm figure a trifle more obstinate. "I was brought up not to believe in marriage."

"By your mother?"

"No; my mother died when I was ten. By my father. And when I put his principles into practice, he turned against me."

"He didn't believe in them, then?"

"In theory." Freda's tone had a scornful ring. "Only he wants to regenerate the world before he puts them into practice. He says we must educate people first. To me it always seems like refusing to bathe until you've learnt to swim."

"But what's your objection to marriage?" was the perplexed Betty's next question.

"I don't know a thing in favour of it, except to provide a home for the children," said Freda, still speaking with some excitement. "And they ought, of course, to belong to the mother, and they would under any sensible agreement, if the mother was provided for and able to earn a decent living for herself. It all comes back to the economic question, and that's got to be settled first, of course." She paused a moment, and then said: "You see, I'm an advocate for woman's rights, Betty dear. Do you hate me for that?"

"I—I don't know anything about it," admitted Betty.

"But you're earning your own living, aren't you?"

"Oh yes."

"Perhaps you haven't got a home?"

"I have, and they want me to go back there and look after the house."

"And why don't you?"

"Sometimes I think I will," Betty murmured, a little ashamed of the admission.

"Oh, don't, dear!—please don't!" Freda pleaded, with great earnestness. "Be independent; it's so splendid. Don't you feel prouder of yourself when you're doing something that helps you to be free?"

"Oh, free!" exclaimed Betty. "I should be much freer at home in most ways."

"You wouldn't! you wouldn't!" urged Freda. "You might have more time to spare, and that sort of thing, but your soul would be all cramped. You'd have to do what your people

did, and think what they thought. What is your father, by the way?"

"He's got a living in Buckinghamshire," said Betty.

"Then your soul certainly wouldn't be your own—unless, perhaps, you believe in all that sort of thing. Do you?"

"Yes. I don't know. I did." Betty wanted to be quite truthful, but she was quite uncertain what she believed at that moment.

"Which means you don't!" exclaimed Freda. "If you did, you'd know."

"I did three months ago," Betty asserted.

"And then . . .?"

Betty leaned forward in her rather uncomfortable arm-chair and sighed desperately. "I'm in a horrible muddle!" she admitted.

"Who is he?" asked Freda.

"I don't really know much about him," Betty replied, quite unconscious of any irrelevancy in the question. "He came to the boarding-house last Christmas. But he's . . . married."

"Was his wife there too?"

"Oh no!" Betty's tone expressed the full extent of her horror at the suggestion. "He hasn't seen her for years. But she's religious, or something, and won't divorce him. They weren't a bit happy ever," she added, stating what seemed to her the most essential point of the case.

"What's his name?" asked Freda, coming to other facts of importance.

Betty hesitated. The name, she felt, so misrepresented him. "Stahl," she said, and then spelt it. "I call him Jimmy, but I believe his real name's Jacob. But he isn't a Jew, or a German. He's quite English."

Freda had drawn her brows together. "Jacob Stahl!" she repeated thoughtfully, and then, with a sudden burst: "Oh, but my dear Betty, I know him! Of course! Such a dear! I could have fallen in love with him myself if I hadn't met Philip. He was working with Cecil Barker in Camden Town

three years ago, and disappeared suddenly, and I never heard what became of him. Oh, this is tremendously exciting ! What a tiny place London is !”

Betty's face had brightened amazingly. All the difficulties of confession, of tedious, unconvincing explanations, had been cleared away ; and, what affected her even more, she suddenly saw Jacob in a new light. Freda's brief summary had presented him in another aspect. Betty saw him, not as the social outcast he must appear to her father and sisters, or to Mrs. Parmenter, but as an intimate member of the great human family. She had heard from Jacob himself some account of his life with Cecil Barker in Camden Town, but this unprejudiced description of him as “ a dear ” gave some familiar quality to his relations that she had never before realised.

“ Oh, how funny !” she exclaimed. “ Did you really know him well ?”

“ Hardly that,” Freda said ; “ but I dare say he would remember me. Tell me, are you very much in love with one another ?”

Betty blushed vividly. “ I don't know,” she said, hiding her face. “ I mean, how is one to know ?” she asked.

“ It's like the other thing, religion,” returned Freda ; “ you always know when you've really got it.”

“ Do you mean that I haven't ?” said Betty, on a note of perplexity.

“ Tell me more about it,” returned Freda cautiously.

And, somewhat disjointedly, with the help of many questions, Betty succeeded in giving some account of the salient happenings of the past ten months, a résumé with, as she felt, all the accents in the wrong places, of the little culminations and reactions that had ended in her promise to join Jacob in Cornwall at the beginning of November.

“ It's only three weeks from now,” she concluded ; “ but I can't go until I've found a partner for Mrs. Parmenter. Do you think I ought to go ?”

“ I suppose you'd go soon enough if he weren't married ?” asked Freda.

"Oh, I should have married him myself long ago, if it hadn't been for that!" Betty admitted.

Freda smiled, and made a little gesture with her hands. "There you are," she said. "The chances you'd take if it were to be a perpetual contract! You'd never think of the risks *then*. But now, because the risk is a different one—new to you; anyhow—you want to be, oh! so dreadfully sure before you'll take it."

Betty saw that this statement did not include all the difficulties of her particular problem, but she recognised a vein of truth in it that she was not prepared to deny.

"Do you think I ought to go?" she repeated rather helplessly.

Freda shook her head. "No one can advise you about that," she said; "you must decide for yourself." She paused, and then added: "*I* should go in your place. If you don't like it, you can give it up. Or will he want you to have children?"

"He has promised that there shan't be any—not yet, at all events," murmured the embarrassed Betty.

"Then there's simply no problem," was Freda's conclusion.

Betty could not agree to that, but she felt that her essential difficulty could never be made plain to Freda. She was no less prejudiced on one side than was Aunt Mary on the other. Each of those two antagonists had been so biassed by training and the circumstances of her life, that she was unable to give a free opinion; each of them had one measure, and could use no other. But if Betty was unable to state her personal problems—that sheer reconciliation of her own conscience which no confidant of hers, not even Jacob himself, seemed the least able to understand—she could put another side of the question that her companion seemed to have overlooked.

"Oh, but there is!" she protested. "If I went and lived with him for a year, and then we agreed to part, I should have cut myself off from my family and my work. I could not get anything to do. I should find it very difficult even to get a place as a cook, without references."

Freda looked thoughtful. "I know," she said. "I've

got that to face very soon. But I think it's worth while. We've got to fight for our opinions and our independence. *I'm not afraid that I shall starve.*"

"But I thought you . . ." hesitated Betty.

"Yes, I know. I didn't mean to tell you. I don't think I ought to have told you, but it came out. However, let's leave it at that; the present arrangement isn't permanent, and I don't think it will last much longer. The point is, are you afraid of risking the 'afterwards' that's facing me, and might face you? I wasn't ever, and I'm not now."

"No," Betty admitted, "that wouldn't prevent my going."

"Well, then . . ." began Freda, but she was interrupted by the banging of the front door, and the sound of heavy footsteps coming upstairs. "There's Philip," she said. "I didn't expect him quite so soon. You'll stop and have tea, won't you?"

Before Betty could reply, Philip Laurence blundered into the room.

5.

His great presence was more in keeping with the proportions of the apartment than any of its present furnishings. He snatched off his soft hat when he saw a stranger, and bowed courteously as Freda made the formal introduction. Then he flung his weight into one of the cheap armchairs, and Betty's nerves jumped, she felt so sure that something must give way; and she saw that even Freda cast a quick appraising glance at the overburdened piece of furniture.

Laurence himself appeared quite oblivious of the covert piece of feminine criticism.

"You've nothing to do with the stage, I hope, Miss Gale," he said, grunting slightly, as he sought to accommodate his large person to the obviously inadequate limits of his chair. "It's the most cursed profession in the world!"

Betty was not at her ease. She had disliked Philip Laurence at first sight, and had been prepared to dislike him before he entered the room.

"No, I've never had anything to do with the stage," she said nervously. She wanted to be gone, but she felt that she must wait now for tea.

Laurence rolled on to the other arm of his chair, which creaked loudly. "Good," he said, in a warm, encouraging voice. "Very good. I implore you never to think of it as a profession."

"I never should," returned Betty. She wondered if he assumed that all young women had an ambition to go on the stage.

"Philip's taking it for granted that any friend of mine must have something to do with the profession," put in Freda, understanding Betty's thought.

"We meet so many of them," Laurence explained. "They're always turning up on the least excuse to badger me for a part. You know the sort of girl, Miss Gale—no talent, no appearance, no voice, but they've a God-sent inspiration that they can act."

"I'm afraid I don't know anything about it," murmured Betty. "I haven't . . ."

"So much the better for you," Laurence interrupted. "It's a tremendous relief to talk to someone who knows nothing about the stage. I'm sick to death of the whole business. I was lured into it by the hope of making money quickly. My play, 'The Independents'—you saw it, no doubt—was a *succès d'estime*, and I spent golden hopes on it; I thought I saw my way to writing a play that should be a *succès fou*. You know, of course, how one gets led on into the belief that the next play is really going to do the trick, and that one will have enough money afterwards to do good work. But I've made up my mind now that this thing I'm rehearsing shall be the last, whether it succeeds or not. I'm going to get away from all these false values before it's too late. It's a damnable thing to be the slave of popularity, and you are perfectly right in condemning me for having prostituted my gifts, such as they are, for so long; but you see how it has been with me. I've had Freda to think of as well as myself. Thank God, she agrees with me that I've

been a fool to waste myself on trying to appeal to this sentimental, uneducated theatre-public we have in London! You can't teach them; they haven't the wit to learn." And he continued to abuse the theatre and all connected with it, rolling uneasily in the groaning chair.

Betty, with slightly drooping head, listened patiently, content so long as she was not called upon to provide conversation. She was untouched by Laurence's constant tributes to her own assumed knowledge and clarity of judgment, but she found something rather fine and stirring in the declaration of his independence. His talk rolled on while the lodging-house servant set the tea-tray, and hardly paused as he somewhat greedily ate and drank. He demanded nothing more from his hearer than an assumption of intelligent interest, and he talked of nothing but the theatre-public's failure to appreciate his own work, and of his final irrevocable determination to be true to his own best instincts, and to starve in a garret rather than prostitute his gifts—"such as they are" was his invariable qualification—to such base uses.

Through it all Freda sat with a faint air of boredom. Once or twice she put in a remark that tentatively questioned the accuracy of Laurence's statements of fact, but he either ignored the interruption or beat down her feeble contradiction with a fresh bludgeon of argument. It seemed to Betty that Freda must have heard all these criticisms and assertions many times before, and thus doubted the quality and the integrity of them. If they were not wearisomely familiar to her, she certainly displayed a strange lack of sympathy.

But all Laurence's long, redundant discussion was addressed most markedly to his visitor; Freda was only dragged in as evidence or as an excuse for the prostitution of his talents, and there were moments when his exaggerated statements of respect for Betty's opinion and the concentration of his effort to create, as it seemed, an effect of his personality and ambitions produced in her a feeling of almost physical discomfort. She felt as if he were making love to her before her new friend, before the woman who passed as his wife.

That impression was not lessened by his manner of saying

good-bye, when at last she was able to extricate herself from the toils of his conversation. His compliments on her understanding were so florid, and he insisted, despite her weak protestations, in accompanying her down to the front door.

She shuddered and gave herself a vehement shake when she was safely out in the street. She felt as if she had just thankfully awakened from a particularly unpleasant dream.

6.

As she walked home through the gloom of the Bloomsbury streets, her thoughts were distracted from her own problem by her consideration of those two people in the Store Street lodgings. She had come into touch with a tragedy of a kind familiar by repute, but hitherto quite outside her personal experience. This was a drama precisely similar in kind to those she had seen acted upon the stage or described in the pages of a novel, but until it was viewed in perspective, it wore the commonplace air of every day. She had observed a single scene full of suggestion, but so separated from the story that all the broad aspects of romance had been lost. The past she might, in some fashion, reconstruct for herself, but the future was hidden, and the simple incident had been presented with no didactic preparations or hint of inevitable poetic justice. Freda was, Betty reflected, the same woman she had seen that morning, the woman for whom she had felt a strangely spontaneous affection. This recognition of Philip Laurence as a gross egotist, who inspired her with a peculiar aversion, in no way altered the character of the woman with whom he was living. And yet, to Betty, Freda had appeared utterly changed in the last hour. She had been a human being, and now she had fallen into a category. Betty was seeing her with the eyes of a Mrs. Lynneker or a Mrs. Parmenter, condemning her because she was so obviously ranked with a well-described class. If Philip Laurence had been of another type, if they had not both been connected with that disreputable profession of the stage, they might have figured more humanly; but for the moment, at least, they were presented in a romantic setting,

and so had become ranged with the whole type pictured in romance—the type that must suffer for its sinning.

Nevertheless, Betty knew, even in the very heart of her reaction, that she and Freda would meet again. Freda's judgment was descending; that unblessed union was on the verge of dissolution; and whatever Betty's private criticism, she was determined to do anything that lay in her power to help Freda when she was in trouble. She might come, then, to the boarding-house in Montague Place, and if she were in financial low water, she would not be troubled to pay any rent. That could be arranged without any difficulty.

By the time she reached home, Betty had forgotten her criticisms in her eager planning to help, and as soon as she was in her own room she wrote an impulsive letter to Freda, begging her to come to Montague Place when she gave up the Store Street lodgings. "You can do it awfully cheaply here, if you don't mind a small room," was Betty's way of suggesting what was in her mind.

Meanwhile she had to plunge again into this difficult business of finding a partner. Mrs. Parmenter told her that two "quite impossible" applicants had called that afternoon.

Also Betty remembered with a touch of impatience, that she would have to go down to Beechcombe on the following Thursday for Hilda's wedding. That prospect gave her no pleasure. Already she felt cut off from her own family, and her disinclination to attend the ceremony was aggravated by the fact that she ought to get a new dress for the occasion, and that she could not afford it.

She settled the latter question by deciding that she must make the best of what she had. What did it matter if she appeared dowdy, or if she offended them all? In a very few weeks she would offend them much more, and it might be the last time that she would see any of them.

She sighed rather hopelessly, as if life were becoming too much for her. That cloud of dread had formed again, more gloomy, more inevitable than ever before.

VII.

A WEDDING

1.

BETTY'S last advertisement produced many applicants, but not the ideal partner. The answers fell into two main categories—the well-bred incompetent and the vulgar practical—and while the vulgar incompetent formed a small but recognisable sub-group, the fourth combination was not represented by a single inquiry. Outside these four considerable divisions were the “perfect idiots”—a despairing classification of Betty's—whose replies had little or no bearing on the subject of the advertisement.

Mrs. Parmenter has assumed a manner of resolute forbearance that expressed both her willingness to go through the farce with exemplary patience, and her calm certainty that the whole business was foredoomed to failure. She read through the letters that came with a quivering sigh of despair, as if some last wild hope had been crushed, and when she was called in to decide upon the claims of some nearly possible applicant who had been interviewed by Betty, the old lady had a half-eager air, as if she were doing her utmost to find those hypothetical qualifications she so unavailingly desired.

Betty looked her despair, but she was conscious that her very despair had its alleviations; and there were times when she was inclined to shift her burden to the shoulders of Fate, declaring that she had done her best, and that nothing more could be expected of her. She still clung somewhat desperately to the idea that she could not leave the boarding-house until she had found someone to take her place..

A letter she received from Jacob on the day before her sister's wedding helped to confirm her in this attitude of resignation. She had written to him, giving him an account of her meeting with Freda, and also telling him of the many replies stimulated by her last advertisement. The general tone of her letter had been encouraging, she thought; she imagined him cheered, and prepared to wait a few more weeks if necessary now that the climax was assured. His answer, however, exhibited no mark of cheerfulness. "Of course I remember Miss Cairns," he wrote, "and her affair with Laurence; but I hope you won't compare me with him. I never thought that affair would be a success; he isn't the sort of man who could stick to one woman for long. I'm sorry for *her*, of course; but she must have known the sort of man he was—he had it written all over him. I liked her; she was a little like you in some ways." His only comment on the advertisement was, "I'm sorry you are having so much trouble about finding a partner; it does seem rather hopeless, doesn't it?"

Betty wondered whether Jacob's desire for her presence in Cornwall was beginning to weaken, and if he could not now be persuaded to wait at least until the spring? The thought of that possible procrastination came as a great relief to her, and when she answered his letter that afternoon, she admitted the failure of her great advertisement by way of preparing him for further delay.

And so, with a mind rather more at ease, she faced the ordeal of the Beechcombe ceremony.

2.

She found a hired waggonette that had been sent both to meet her and another guest expected by the up-train, due in another twenty minutes. The driver of the waggonette was a stranger to Betty. "I was told to bring two fares, miss, one by the down and the other by the up," was all the information he could give in answer to her question as to the name of the second visitor.

She was chilled at the outset. Her common sense told her

that the Rectory was in the throes of preparation, and also that an economy of conveyances was no doubt very necessary. But something within her—she wondered if it were the consciousness of her own guilty intentions—persisted in urging that “they” might have given her some kind of welcome. She had a sense of being neglected, and all the reasonable explanations that so admirably excused this apparent neglect failed to alter her sense of it.

She would have walked on, but it had begun to rain, and she did not wish further to accentuate her dowdiness by arriving mud-stained and draggled. Already she was bitterly regretting that she had not bought a new dress for the occasion.

Her incipient distress was not relieved when she discovered that the second passenger was the “Northampton aunt,” as they called her at home—Mr. Gale’s sister-in-law, who had a house that was quite distinctively a “place” near Kingsthorpe. Betty had not seen her for many years, but she had a vivid recollection of her as an overpowering, intolerant woman, who condescended on rare occasions to admit the relationship between her late husband and the Rector of Beechcombe. The money had been all her own, and she had lifted her husband from an ignominious curacy to a leisured retirement at the Kingsthorpe place.

She greeted Betty with the carelessness of assured position. “Let me see, it’s Violet, isn’t it?” she asked, and apparently overlooking the offered correction, persisted in the use of that name. Her conversation during the drive was almost entirely confined to an account of the difficulties of her journey. It appeared that she had come a cross-country route by way of Cheddington and Aylesbury, and that the train service had been “disgraceful.”

Only once did she branch from the absorbing topic to make a brief reference to the object for which she had so incomprehensively suffered all this inconvenience.

“Let me see, *what* is the bridegroom’s name?” she asked.

“Phelps,” replied Betty.

“One of the Hertfordshire people?” asked Mrs. Gale, with a first flicker of interest.

"I have no idea," Betty was compelled to admit, and felt more insignificant and middle-class than ever.

And when she had arrived at the Rectory and could evade further conversation with the overpowering Mrs. Gale, Betty still felt hopelessly out of it, as she phrased her sense of pariahism. There was nothing for her to do. If she could have gone into the kitchen and helped to prepare the somewhat ostentatious luncheon, she would have been happy. But all the arrangements had been made, and were being overlooked by Violet. Her father and Mrs. Lynneker were fully occupied with Mrs. Gale in the drawing-room, and Hilda had momentarily fled from the bustle of preparations, and gone up the village with two cousins from Oxford, who had come earlier in the morning by way of High Wycombe.

After a brief hesitation, Betty decided that she also would find some sanctuary from the hurrying urgency that pervaded the whole house. The eddy of her choice was "the girls' " bedroom, where she found Hilda's wedding-dress displayed full length upon the bed.

Betty examined this symbol with a faint, inexplicable sense of repulsion. It was a pretty dress, not too elaborate, although the prevailing fashion had demanded a reasonable flouncing of the rather full skirt. But outstretched there, empty and prostrate, the dress had no humanity, and its symbolism seemed part of the idea of sacrifice. Betty wondered vaguely what her sister's feelings were for this almost unknown Mr. Phelps, whether she had ever considered the significance of the rite of marriage?

She was still frowning perplexedly over the tangle of her thoughts when she heard Hilda's voice in the garden below, and a minute or two later, the young bride-elect raced up the stairs and burst into the room.

"Hullo, Bet, how lovely to find you here!" was her greeting. "They never told me you'd come." Her pleasure was unmistakably genuine, as was also the warmth of her embrace, and Betty suddenly thrilled to an awakening of emotional interest in all that had till now appeared so orthodox and mechanical.

They had hardly drawn apart when the luncheon-bell rang.

"Oh, bother! Look here, darling," Hilda broke out, "I'm not going down; they're going to bring me something up here. I'm supposed to be dressing, of course. Stay and have something to eat here with me, will you, dear? And then you can help me to dress."

"Rather," assented Betty eagerly. "But what about Violet?" she added. "Won't she want to help you?"

"Oh, she'll come up later," Hilda said, with a hint of impatience in her voice. "She's got to be in for the lunch, of course, and Heaven knows how long they'll talk over it with the Northampton aunt and all."

"I'd love to have it up here with you, dear," Betty returned. "I was only afraid . . . I didn't want to be in the way, I mean, if you and Violet . . ."

"*That's* all right. You needn't worry about *that*," replied Hilda. She was plainly in a state of considerable nervous excitement, but Betty guessed that there had been some estrangement between her two younger sisters since she had seen them nearly three months ago. Possibly, that recognisably acid strain in Violet had been more in evidence since the engagement. It might have been difficult for her to hide a little spinsterish jealousy of Hilda's success; and Hilda, no doubt, had found new interests, had been partly absorbed in a new life, new hopes, that Violet could not share with her.

3.

"I suppose you're frightfully happy?" Betty asked presently. She put the question quietly, controlling by her tone and expression the somewhat hectic hilarity of her sister's mood.

"What do you mean by that, Bet?" Hilda returned, dropping her voice from the high note of excitement on which it had been pitched since she entered the room.

"Nothing," Betty said. "Only just that—you are happy, aren't you?"

"Oh, of course I am," Hilda said. She propped her chin in

the cup of her two hands and stared past Betty at the window behind her.

"You're tremendously in love with him?" continued Betty earnestly.

Hilda nodded vehemently, and then said: "Why do you ask like that, Bet? Don't you think I am?"

"Oh yes, as far as I know. I've never seen you together, you see," Betty explained. "Only I wanted you to tell me. You seem to be so excited."

Hilda frowned, and the superficial likeness between the two sisters became more remarkable. "You're such a serious mouse, Bet," she said; and then she got up and came and sat at her sister's feet, and leaned her head against her.

"It isn't that, dear," she went on, when she had settled herself in her new position. "But you understand, don't you, how I hate to-day?"

"Tell me," murmured Betty, bending affectionately over her.

"I can tell *you*," Hilda said in a low voice. "Violet wouldn't understand. She's been funny, rather, lately. We haven't been nearly such good pals since I've been engaged. But you're such a quiet old darling! I have missed you awfully, Bet, really."

Betty's arm tightened about her sister's shoulder, and she leaned her cheek on Hilda's hair. "Dear old girl!" she said. "Tell me why you hate to-day so much."

"It's being stuck up to be stared at and made a show of," Hilda explained. "I wish Frank and I could have just run away somewhere together, and got married quietly afterwards with no one knowing anything about it. I—I feel so ashamed somehow, Bet. I was reading through the service this morning before breakfast. I've often heard it, of course, but I never understood it before. When you think of yourself saying these things it's so different. And—and it's rather *horrid*, Bet, in some ways, I think. I don't much like other people looking at me while father's reading all that about—you know. I feel as if getting married is just something that only concerns Frank and me, and I hate the thought of them,

that dreadful Aunt Gale and all, staring at me. I met her in the hall when I came in, and she looked at me as if I were up for sale—sort of sizing me up, you know. And the two Oxford cousins were funny, I thought. I dare say it's all imagination, but oh ! Bet darling, I *do* wish it was all over. I simply hate dressing up for the beastly ceremony !”

“ I understand ; I should hate it, too,” said Betty quietly. A sudden impulse stirred her to confide in Hilda ; they had never been so much in sympathy as at that moment.

“ I think if I were going to—to get married, I should run away,” she said, “ and—and perhaps chance the wedding afterwards.”

“ Oh, I didn't mean *that* !” said Hilda, straightening herself, and turning, so that she could look up into her sister's face. “ You don't think I meant anything wicked like that, Bet ?”

“ You think that *would* be wicked ?” asked Betty.

“ Well, of course,” returned Hilda, with absolute conviction.

“ But suppose you and Frank couldn't get married,” Betty hesitated. “ I mean suppose there was some obstacle in the way. . . .”

“ How could there be ?” Hilda interpolated.

“ Well, suppose he had been married very young to a horrid sort of a woman, and that they couldn't get on, and had lived apart for years, would you run off with him and chance getting married afterwards ?”

Hilda had returned to her thoughtful attitude ; she was sitting on the floor, her knees drawn up far enough to support her elbows, her chin resting on her knuckles. She was evidently trying to consider the question with a fine detachment. “ I don't think Frank would ask me to,” was her verdict.

“ But if he did ?”

“ He wouldn't be Frank if he did. It would all be different.”

It was an unsatisfactory answer, but enough for Betty. She saw that her own troubles must wait. She would not intrude them on a Hilda so naturally absorbed in her own affairs. But that was not all. As Mrs. Blakey had said, Betty was one of those dear kind creatures who were always

looking after other people. She had to sacrifice herself. The others—she must add Hilda to the growing list—were eager for her sympathy and support, but they did not want to be bothered with her personal worries.

"I say, old girl, it's after half-past one; oughtn't you to be getting dressed?" she suggested.

"Great Scott, yes!" agreed Hilda, jumping to her feet. "If we're not married by three o'clock it isn't legal. Come on!"

4.

Sitting in the Rectory pew an hour later, Betty's thoughts returned to that conversation in the bedroom. Next to her Mrs. Gale, absolved by her social position from anything more than a formal reverence, stared critically about her; and farther down, one of the Oxford cousins was holding a whispered conversation with Violet. None of them seemed to feel that this brief interval of waiting was a solemn introduction to the ceremony during which two young people, almost unknown to one another, were about to take the most binding vows of fidelity before God, pledging their lives blindly to a future of which they had not taken, were not able to take, serious thought. That most certainly was not the attitude of her overbearing aunt, nor probably of any other member of the rustling congregation. This affair to them was a show, the most interesting incident in the life of a young woman, for it was round her that all the interest centred; the man, despite all conventions, is in some way exempted from the letter of the contract. Marriage is by common consent a less important affair in his life; he can, in one particular, generally avoid that vow of constancy. It seemed to Betty that the ritual of the affair was, perhaps, as Jacob had said, a farce, and if it were not performed by three o'clock it would be null and void—Hilda and her lover would be no more married in the eyes of the law than Jacob and Betty down in Cornwall, making their vows to each other without any witnesses to record the fact in some dingy ledger. Surely before God it would be the result that counted, the keeping of the

promise, not the form and manner in which the promise was made. . . .

If only she were not such a coward, if she did not fear so foolishly the strictures of all these people. Probably there was not a single person in this big congregation who would care to speak to her if she omitted this ceremony before going to live with Jacob. The Oxford boy cousin, perhaps, might think it "rather sporting," and look unpleasantly sly, as if she had put herself in the class of women with whom certain familiarities were possible. . . .

At last an unrecognisable Hilda came up the aisle on the arm of her uncle—their mother's brother—upon whom had devolved the honour of "giving away" the bride; they were followed by two little girl bridesmaids, self-consciously pre-occupied with the management of the satin train they were carrying. "What did all these rites mean?" Betty wondered. She had begun to examine them for the first time in her life; she had not the knowledge to trace them back to their dim origins, but vaguely she recognised some idea of a bargain in them all. In the old days, she seemed to remember, marriage had been a matter of arrangement between the parents, of arrangement and barter. . . .

She listened intelligently to the words of the service, following it in her Prayer-Book. Hilda's comments in the bedroom had stirred her curiosity. She had attended many weddings, but she had to confess that the actual meaning and purport of the ritual was unknown to her. And here, too, she found again that hint of bargaining, that and the admission that marriage was a kind of licensed and permissible fornication. . . .

Her father took the service, making the most of his fine voice, and the bridegroom's father—he had come down with his son, and Betty had not seen him before—afterwards gave a short address from the altar-rails. He was an oldish man with a white beard, and he confined himself to a few pompous remarks on the sanctity of the marriage vows. Betty was no wiser for the address, and she wondered if old Mr. Phelps had ever examined the inner meaning of the marriage service. He was reputed, she remembered, to be a great classical scholar.

5.

She walked back to the station after the reception, glad to get away from the crowd of chattering relations. She had hardly seen Hilda again. When they had left the church, Betty had been fully occupied for a time by the many relatives and friends whom she had not spoken to before. She had meant to go upstairs with Hilda while she changed her dress, but that design had been frustrated.

And later, when Hilda had come down to say good-bye, she had evidently been only too anxious to escape. "You're coming to stay with us, Bet, aren't you?" she had said hurriedly as she kissed Betty; and Betty had nodded, too confused with the general bustle even to wonder whether she would ever be able to accept that invitation, or if Hilda would care to renew it if her sister disgraced the family.

But she thought of that in the train, and it seemed to her that the loss of Hilda would be almost the only thing that mattered. She had felt so separated from all that crowd. And had she not already disgraced the family—in the opinion of the Northampton aunt, for instance—by running a boarding-house?

She had been terribly "out of it," she reflected, and she felt lonely and miserable. There were only two people she could confide in now—Freda Laurence and Jacob. The first of them, at least, she might see very soon. And, indeed, she saw her sooner than she expected, for when she arrived in Montague Place Mrs. Parmenter greeted her with the announcement that a new boarder had come in to take "Mr. Stoll's old room. A Miss Cairns, dear; she says she knows you."

Betty went straight up to Freda's bedroom.

"Oh, how nice to find you here!" she said. "Have you really come to stay? I'm so glad!"

VIII.

THE AMAZING LETTER

1.

FREDA'S affair with Philip Laurence was, she confessed, finally settled. "We have agreed to part," she told Betty. "It has been inevitable for a long time now, but we dragged on for one reason or another."

She would give no details. "It isn't that I mind talking about it," she said, "so far as the sentimental side of it goes; but it would not be fair to him."

Betty did not press her questions. She had no doubt that Freda was justified in breaking the relation, and in refusing the offer of marriage which Philip Laurence seemed astoundingly to have made a few days before the final separation.

Freda's presence in the house made a great difference to Betty. She had, for the first time, someone to whom she could confide an intelligible statement of her perplexities, someone who was glad to listen. The effect of this friendship, however, was not primarily to help the cause of the desolate Jacob.

Freda's prejudice was of another type to that of Beechcombe. In this matter she could keep an open mind. She had no desire to bring these two together that was comparable to Beechcombe's desire to keep them apart. Her first question as to Betty's feeling for Jacob had not been satisfactorily answered, and before she had been in the house a week, Mrs. Blakey, shrewd enough to sight a new ally, cornered Freda in the drawing-room one evening, and in her own plain

manner gave her a version of the affair that strengthened Freda's earlier inference.

"She's sorry for him, Miss Cairns," was the substance of Mrs. Blakey's opinion; and she was careful to say no word in disparagement of Jacob that might come back to Betty, and so put weight in what was, according to Mrs. Blakey, the wrong scale.

Mrs. Parmenter followed the admirable lead given to her, and probably under instruction from her superior in tact, took up much the same line of argument, only adding on her own account that she was sure Betty would never be happy with Mr. Stoll, for reasons that were not explicitly stated.

One curious result of these intrigues—a result that seemed at the time to have no bearing on the essential question—was the receiving of Freda both by Mrs. Parmenter and Mrs. Blakey into a confidence that distinguished her position from that of the ordinary boarder. She had given these two ladies no hint of her falling from their standard of righteousness—she had promised Betty to make that reserve—and they had, in Mrs. Blakey's phrase, "taken to her from the first"; and they took to her even more when they found that she was working on their side.

And these influences were being supported by another that was, it seemed to Betty, even more important—Jacob had almost ceased to write to her.

He replied after an interval of five days—an interval filled for her with many qualms of anxiety—to the letter in which she had confessed the failure of her advertisement; but he made no reference to that most important admission. Betty had expected protests and pleadings, and when her relief of being spared was over, she had a shiver of doubt. She was not expert enough in her criticism of the literary manner to note that this letter of Jacob's was even more carelessly worded than that which had preceded it; but she did not fail to read a certain feebleness of spirit into the matter of his unusually short account of his doings. Her inference—a perfectly natural one—was that he no longer desired her presence with the same fervour, and that the writing of letters to her

was becoming a mere duty—an inference that found her curiously resentful. She answered him at once, and although she made no reference to her future plans, the tone was fonder than it had been since the first month of his absence.

To that letter she received no answer for over a week, and then it was no more than a few lines, plainly written in a hurry.

She was piqued. If he had reproached her, she would have been stricken with the consciousness that she had not kept her promise. But she felt that she could put but one construction on this apparent carelessness. He wanted to get out of it, she thought, and she found the reflection unbelievably painful. She carried it about with her, a secret wound, suddenly aware that now the sense of compulsion was removed, something else had gone with it—something desirable that had been the source of a new joy in life.

She tried to keep it from Freda, but that proved to be impossible.

2.

"I think you might tell me what's happened," was the first hint Betty received that her trouble was not to be disguised by mere silence.

They were in the kitchen; Freda had been taking lessons in cooking. "Failing the stage," she had said, "it's a way of making a living. I believe in making myself capable in as many ways as possible."

"Nothing," Betty replied with attempted surprise. "Nothing's happened. Why?"

"Of course something's happened," Freda said. "Has he written? Is he pressing you to run away?"

The intermittent presence of Alice interfered with any confession at that time, but later that evening Betty went up and sat in her friend's bedroom, which, small as it was, had the advantage of being supplied with a gas fire.

"Don't you want to tell me about it, old girl?" Freda asked irrelevantly at the first pause. "Is he trying to persuade you?"

Betty shook her head. "Anything but," she murmured.

"You don't mean that . . . ?" said Freda. Their conversation was very elliptical now, when they were alone together. The smallest intimation was sufficient.

"I don't know," Betty returned, staring very hard at the dull glow of the gas fire. "He has hardly troubled to write the last fortnight, and then not a word about my going to him."

"You don't think that he's found anyone else ?"

Betty shivered slightly. "It seems impossible to me, somehow," she said. "But I suppose it isn't. Men do, don't they ?"

"Some," returned Freda, obviously making an application in her own mind.

"He didn't seem a bit like that," Betty continued. "I thought . . ."

"Are you only judging by his letter ?" Freda asked.

"Oh yes."

"Has he said anything at all definite ?"

"He hasn't said anything. That's what's so funny. The three months are up, and I thought he would be furious. I wrote a fortnight ago, telling him that I couldn't find a partner, and I expected . . ." Her voice trembled, and she stopped abruptly.

Freda made no reply, and for a minute or two they sat in silence, neither looking at the other.

"I don't care," said Betty at last, looking very determined.

"Oughtn't you to give him some chance to explain himself ?" returned Freda.

"Why should I ?"

"You're only guessing, are you ?"

"What else could it mean ? If you knew how he used to implore me. . . ."

"I do, more or less, don't I ? But you promised you would go to him at the end of three months. He may feel now that you must go of your own free will. Perhaps he thinks that if you don't care enough for him to keep your promise, it would be better that you shouldn't go at all."

"I know; it sounds all right, but it isn't like him somehow, except just at the last. Then he was rather like that. But the tone of his letter is so different. . . ."

"What are you going to do?" asked Freda, after another pause.

"I can't *do* anything, can I?" said Betty, with a tiny shrug of her shoulders. "Except wait," she added.

"Aren't you going to write?"

"Not yet, anyway."

"Then he'll think you don't care."

"Well, if he thinks that. . . ." Betty paused, and then went on bravely: "I don't know that I *do* care."

"You do," Freda said. "I thought you didn't much. But you keep yourself in so."

"I've had to," Betty admitted.

"I think you ought to write," said Freda.

"I shall wait for a few days in any case," was Betty's decision. "I—I don't know what to say."

"Why not ask him what's the matter?"

"Oh, I can't!" was all Betty's explanation; but Freda seemed to understand it.

3.

A week later her letter was still unwritten, and she had had no further word from Jacob. A certain stubborn resignation was coming to her, but she felt that she could not endure the suspense. Every morning she found excuses for him; and while she eagerly awaited the coming of the first post—the letters from him never came by any other—she found half a dozen versions to explain his silence and his change of tone. Then the sound of that declamatory double-knock would reverberate through the house, and she would go up from the kitchen to find one of the German boarders sorting the letters in the hall, and would be met by the invariable "Nozzing for you, Miss Gale," and always she suffered a reaction. It was as if that daily failure was perpetually a fresh insult to her. She had an unpleasant feeling that the smiling Mr. Meyer must guess the reason of her expectation, and that he grinned

exultingly over her disappointment. For two days now she had been unable to face him, and had waited until she had heard him go into the dining-room, before she had dared miserably to investigate the letters on the hall-stand.

She wrote at last in order to end the suspense, and she said nothing to Freda until the letter was posted.

"I suggested that we should wait another six months," she said, when she went to Freda's room that evening and confessed that she had delivered her ultimatum.

"Was that all?" Freda asked.

"Practically," Betty said. "I was frightfully stiff and formal. I said that I hadn't heard from him for some time, and I didn't know whether he remembered that the three months were up, and that I hadn't been able to find a partner yet for Mrs. Parmenter, and hadn't we better wait. I suggested six months. I wanted to give him a chance to back out of it if he wished to. He can easily now. He has only got to say 'Yes,' and not write any more."

"Do you think he would do that? Wouldn't it be rather a sneaky way of getting out of it?"

"I don't know," said Betty defiantly. "I thought I understood him, but evidently I didn't. If I had written like that a month ago, I should have expected him to come up by the next train. But I don't now."

"Anyhow, he's sure to write," suggested Freda.

"I should think so," agreed Betty, a little doubtfully.

"I can't help thinking you're doing him an injustice somewhere," said Freda thoughtfully, after a pause. "It's quite natural, of course. You've got a reaction. But I shouldn't think he's a sneak. I know I didn't see much of him, but he didn't strike me a bit like that."

"Oh, well, we shall soon see," returned Betty. She felt cold and heartless now that she had taken a definite step. Nothing seemed to matter.

For quite a long time they sat without speaking, and then Betty said suddenly, "This was his room." The announcement appeared to her a tremendous confession, a final dissolution of the last bond between her and Jacob. Freda got up

quickly and put her arms round her. "Oh, Betty, old girl, you mustn't take it like that!" she said.

"I don't care," Betty protested, holding herself very stiffly; and then the strength seemed to go out of her; she clung weakly to Freda, and her whole body trembled. "What's the good of caring?" she tried to say, but the words would not come; they were too poignant to be spoken. She felt that her life was ended, and the realisation broke down the last remnant of her determined self-control. She began to cry hopelessly. "I don't care," she repeated foolishly, between her sobs.

Freda, trying to comfort her, felt a sudden hatred for Jacob. He appeared as another representative of the brutal sex that had always misused women.

4.

Betty ignored the post next morning. All that day she felt detached from life. She had made her confession. She did not care, she had protested, and Jacob was but one item in all the dull, uninteresting world that offered no aspect of attractiveness. She thought her curious love-affair—the only one she had ever had—was finished for ever, and she was glad, she imagined, that all the strain and anxiety of it was over. She was free now either to stay on in Montague Place or to return to Beechcombe, and although neither prospect appeared even remotely inviting at that moment, she had, at least, the consolation of knowing that she need not act under any compulsion.

Yet her very emancipation wore a barren air. It was as if she had come from the confinement of a walled garden out into some bleak, open space. Life itself appeared wide and desolate, so arid that the freedom of her choice became valueless. She might go whither she would, but there was no place to which she wanted to go. From her present standpoint, one horizon was as little attractive as another. Subconsciously she missed the stimulus of the thrust she had so long resisted; and even on that day her thoughts returned—with a vacant desire for the compulsion she had in one form almost

thankfully abandoned—to the contemplation of the religion that had become somewhat remote from her during the past ten months. Having regained her independence, she was eager once again to abandon it. . . .

She went straight into the dining-room next morning, without a glance at the stand in the hall on which the letters were generally left. But even before she entered the room, she knew that Jacob had answered her.

For one moment she believed that her intuition had failed her, for the letter she saw lying beside her plate differed materially from the one she had seen so clearly in imagination. This was a bulging foolscap envelope, and in the instant that elapsed while she moved from the door to the table, the thought leapt bright and clear to her mind that Jacob had returned her letters to her, that this was the final seal of their parting.

And with that thought she realised that her coldness, the strange anæsthesia of all emotions she had suffered the day before, had been unreal, had been induced by her own imaginings. Now she was to suffer the real pain to which her former stillness had been no more than an introduction. In future she would be truly dead and cold through all the endless days that stretched illimitably out to some unknown, undesired end. . . .

Mr. Meyer, standing on the hearthrug, was the only other occupant of the room as yet.

“You haf to-day your letter, Miss Gale,” he said genially. “I bring it in for you.”

“Oh, thank you; it’s nothing important,” Betty said quietly. “Hasn’t Alice sent up breakfast yet? I’ll go and hurry her up.”

The excuse came to her automatically. She picked up the letter and left the room, unheeding Mr. Meyer’s surprised expostulation that the breakfast was already on the table.

She went straight to her own room and locked herself in. She could not bear the thought that anyone should guess her humiliation. But when she was alone and safe from interruption, she hesitated. She realised then that the contents of

the envelope in her hand could not be her own letters returned to her; it was the wrong shape; it was too smooth and regular for a package of that sort.

At last, fumblingly, she tore it open.

She found half a dozen sheets of foolscap, closely covered with writing. At the top of the first sheet he had written and twice underlined, "Read my letter first."

5.

She found the letter still in the envelope.

"After I got your letter," he had begun, without any conventional form of address, "I decided to send you the enclosed. It is a sort of diary that I have been keeping for the last fortnight. I finished it to-day. I never meant to send it to you, and I feel that I ought not to send it now; but I must. Don't let it influence you more than you can help. I dare say much of it is very silly, and probably I shall be all right again in a few months." After that he had written again, "I never meant to send it to you," and had run his pen through the sentence and concluded: "You *must* do what you think is right."

Betty frowned in perplexity. What did he mean by saying that he would "probably be all right again in a few months"? Had he been ill? Was he still ill? She read the letter again before she turned to the "diary."

"To-day has been the worst day yet," was the opening sentence, "a day of more unhappiness and loneliness and longing for you than was yesterday or Tuesday. There has been an intolerable wind and a fine mist of rain that nevertheless stings like sand. I went out for a few minutes up to the pillar-box, and was glad to get back. But as though it were not enough that I cannot get out, more personal inconvenience has been heaped upon me by the fact that the fire has smoked unbearably, so that I have had no peace or comfort. It is these small annoyances which, if they persist, drive one to desperation. I have been cursing fate and destiny and all the gods there be this afternoon. And as I cursed I realised my tiny impotence. I saw myself as some useless, petulant

insect, as the smallest of midges venting its fury on an elephant. It is this sense of impotence which brings one to the last despair. I can't write or read. I am sick of myself and my thoughts and my futility. And this putting of my mood on to paper without any trouble to choose my phrases and avoid repetition is the only relief I can find. I am thinking of it, Betty, at this moment, as a letter to you. I know, of course, that I shall never send it, whatever happens. It would be too much like a feeble whining to you to have pity on me. I don't want to get you like that. But it is a relief to address you in some way, to feel that I am writing to you, although that other person who is and isn't me knows about and tries to remind me that I'm not writing to you at all. I don't care; I shall think of this as a sort of dreadful last hope. I change my mind every five minutes. Perhaps I *shall* send it to you in one eventuality. I shall if I want to. Nothing could possibly be worse than this. The woman has washed up now and gone. I shan't see another soul until ten o'clock to-morrow morning—sixteen hours; not that I . . .”

Betty turned the page quickly, but could find no continuation of the unfinished sentence. Apparently one or more sheets was missing. Then her eye caught the words at the head of a page: “Realise that the only thing is for you to come of your own free will,” and she went on from that point; “. . . but will you ever come? It is so impossible for me to believe that nothing but a sense of duty to the Parmenter woman keeps you back. She is old and selfish, and, of course, she wants you (who wouldn't ?) ; but it isn't credible that no one could be found to take your place as the manager of a rotten boarding-house. It's just that the old beast doesn't like a change. She's got you, and she means to keep you if she can, and she doesn't care a hang what's best for *you*. Perhaps you think I don't either. I admit it looks like that. But I do, although that's something that you can't understand yet. You can't believe that I really think that it's better to do what you think is wicked than kill your soul by routine and narrowness, as you will if you go on at that beastly place. I know we should be happy together. It's a

good thing to have to face the world, face people, and tell them you don't care a hang what they think of you. It braces you. It's a tonic. And that brings me back to my own weakness. I do so want you to come of your own free will, Betty dear. I ought to have learnt, I suppose, that if I want you I must take you, order you, make you come, and then shoulder the responsibility. But for the most part I *can't* see it like that. I feel that in this particular thing it is necessary for you to choose for yourself. If I make you come—by sending you this, for instance—you would never forget it. You would always have the feeling that you had been forced into coming, and that would stand between us; it would prevent you from ever loving me. . . .”

Betty was startled to see a drop of water splash on to the page she was reading. She was not aware that she had been crying. She lifted her head, and the room seemed to be ringing still with Jacob's voice.

She put down the manuscript, and buried her face in her hands. She could see him and hear him. He seemed to be actually present with her there in her own room, and his face was drawn and pleading. How could she ever have misjudged him? How could she have doubted that he wanted her more than anyone had ever wanted her?

Her tears were coming quickly, but quietly, without pain. She was not wrenched and hurt as she had been when she had cried in Freda's room. She was not sure that her tears were not tears of happiness.

Presently she wiped her eyes and picked up the diary again. She found that she was reading the last page.

“ . . . for another six months,” the page began, “ it is so tragic that it is almost funny. I did laugh when I read your letter, but I don't think my laugh had much humour in it. Six months more of this, as if I could . . . ”

After that he had drawn a whole row of capital “ B's ” across the page and partly crossed them out. Then the manuscript began again in a more careful writing: “ I have been down to Livelow. The wind has gone down, but the sea is magnificent. It puts strength into me. I have decided to

send you this, and I will write a note with it telling you how to read it. I don't care and I don't care. Only, of course, you may not come even after reading this. Well, if you don't, I shall know that you don't care, and that it is better you shouldn't come." Then came a long dash, and two lines lower down he had written and underlined: "I shan't commit suicide. I had meant to, but I see that that isn't fair. Believe that, Betty—believe that absolutely. Whatever you do, I shall go on living in my own haphazard way, however blank life may be."

6.

She could read no more then. She got up and put back the manuscript in the envelope, unlocked her door, and went upstairs.

She met Freda by the dining-room door.

"I was just coming down to make inquiries," she said; and then, catching sight of Betty's face in the gloom of the lobby, she dropped her voice and went on: "You've heard from him? Come up to my room. Is it all right?"

"Yes, it's all right," said Betty quietly. "I'm going this morning," she explained, when they were in Freda's bedroom. "I know everything now. All this," she explained, holding up the long envelope. "I haven't read it all yet, but quite enough. Freda, I want you to help me. I'm going to run away. I don't want to say anything to anyone but you till I'm gone. I couldn't stand a fuss this morning."

Freda nodded. "I shall miss you frightfully," she said; "but I'm sure you're right."

"You needn't explain anything to Mrs. Parmenter or anyone, if you don't want to," suggested Betty.

"Oh, I don't mind that," laughed Freda. "I'll tell her. I think I shall take your place for a time. I believe I'm the perfect partner you've been advertising for so long."

Betty's face lighted. "Really?" she said. "Oh, how splendid of you! I never thought of that. Oh, it would be such a relief to me if you did."

"I think it's a great idea for me, if Mrs. Parmenter doesn't

mind," said Freda. "But what about you? What train are you going to catch? Have you got any money? And you haven't had any breakfast, have you?"

"The train goes at eleven o'clock from Paddington," Betty explained. "It's the one he went by."

"And what about money?"

"I've got three pounds. I think it'll be enough. All the rest is in the Post Office. But what about my getting away? I think I'll pack now, and then would you mind taking my things to the station? Mrs. Parmenter and Mrs. Blakey won't be down yet, and the German boys will have gone out. There'll only be Alice, and I'll send her up to do the bedrooms."

Her thoughts were hurrying so, that her words would not keep pace with them. "I must telegraph to him," she said. "I ought to do that at once."

"I'll go and do that while you pack," said Freda. "What's his address?"

"Trevarrian, Mawgan, St. Columb, Cornwall. Say, 'I'm coming by the eleven o'clock train from Paddington. Meet me. Betty.'"

"Oh, my dear, you must write it down," expostulated Freda.

7.

"I don't mind much whether Alice saw my things go out or not," Betty explained, as she and Freda waited in Paddington Station. "Only I can't get rid of the feeling that I must hurry. I've read all his letter through now, and I'm afraid. I don't know what he might do. You did send that telegram, didn't you?"

"It went at a quarter past nine," Freda said. "It's bound to be all right. He'd get it by ten o'clock."

"It is bound to be all right, isn't it?" Betty persisted.

She had no thought in her mind now, save her anxiety to be with Jacob and to reassure him.

But she had before her eight uninterrupted hours in the train—time enough to reconsider the decision she had at last so impulsively made.

BOOK III
SOLITUDE

IX.

JACOB IN CORNWALL

1.

WHATEVER doubts and fears Jacob may have suffered during the first two hours of his journey into Cornwall were finally dissipated after the train left Bristol. Already he was in the West Country, and the spirit of his splendid adventure was warming him to a glow of excitement. The parting with Betty no longer depressed him. He saw it as a temporary necessity, and was full of a glorious certainty that in three months she would come to share with him this intoxicating release from the gloom of London.

He was definitely conscious of release. During all his adult life London had held him. He had been unable to break away from her. He remembered how more than three years before he had come first to Cornwall, sunk in depression, a failure without money or prospects, thrown over both by his wife and the beautiful Madeline, who had been killed so tragically a few months ago. And even then, in face of all his loneliness and difficulties, that wild coast had put new heart into him, had given to him on one bright April morning fresh power and courage to return to the city of doubt and despair which had been the scene of all his misery, but from which he could not then escape.

He had had wonderful experiences during the interim. The Jacob Stahl of three and a half years ago was a strangely different being from himself. He saw that younger version objectively, as it were the figure of someone whom he had known with an incredible intimacy, someone who had died

and whose place he had taken. Undoubtedly he was not the same man who had sat on a well-remembered rock, and, looking out over the Atlantic, had said: "I have had to learn in bitterness, but I have not lost my ideals." He felt that he might give expression to the same thought now, but with a different intention.

In these days of doubt and despair he had always been struggling against some unseen power that relentlessly drove him into bondage. He had wanted to be free, to be quit of office drudgery and the authority of any urgent superior. But when he tried to write, some cloud had been interposed between him and his vision. He knew that all he had attempted in those days had been poor, worthless stuff. It seemed as if that hated control of his had been deliberately guiding his destiny. He had been able to fight it and he had fought it, but he had always lost in the end. Sometimes sheer necessity had beaten him, and sometimes his resolution had failed, and all struggle had suddenly appeared as futile. But always when he submitted, when he had been willing to relinquish himself to the ease of being bidden, the control had taken a new form and stirred him again to effort. He remembered how three years before he had paced that little sitting-room of Cecil Barker's in Camden Town, and wondered why he was so goaded and driven. . . .

Now, as he looked back on his life, it seemed to him that none of that struggle could have been purposeless. He had been guided from childhood to the present hour. All that he had learned and suffered had been necessary for him before he was fitted to meet Betty and to take up the task of letters. He knew now that he could write. For a time his thoughts played eagerly with the novel he had planned, and every scene of it was lit with the brightness of reality.

Nevertheless, he had no illusions as to his own capacity. He knew that he would never become a great writer. He did not greatly desire to be either famous or rich. He knew, as in some way he had always known, that ultimately he must find expression in literature, but that expression was a means only; the end was his own spiritual development. . . .

Betty was in that also. She had some immense lesson to teach him. . . .

He came back to the present and to his exquisite consciousness of release as the train ran along the sea's edge by Dawlish. The English Channel sparkled in a fresh south-westerly breeze, and he read his own joy into the leap and flicker of the crisp sea. Here were colour and movement under the great freedom of the sky. It came to him afresh with a flood of thankfulness that he was going to live within sight and sound of the sea.

He fell to a tender consideration of the restrictions of his fellow-travellers. They, poor souls, were going to Devon and Cornwall for a little fortnight's or three weeks' holiday. He was going to stay in that splendid freedom for as long as he would. He could have shouted for joy at the thought. It became imperative that he should tell someone.

A man some few years younger than himself was standing near him, also intent apparently on the beauty of Dawlish sands. Jacob looked up and caught his eye.

"Jolly day," he remarked, by way of introduction.

"If you like this sort of thing," returned the stranger, and added: "I'm fair sick of it! Been up to London for my holiday, and had a high old time, I can tell you; and now I've got another twelve months of Plymouth in front of me. Ever been to that hole?"

Jacob shook his head.

"Lucky for you," said the young man. "Take my advice and keep out of it."

Jacob changed his mind as to the necessity of sharing his joy with this stranger. "You might get as sick of London as you have of Plymouth," he suggested.

"Likely enough—in time. I could do with a bit more of it, though," replied the stranger. "You live there?"

"I have for twelve years," Jacob explained. "I'm not going back there."

"Doesn't seem to have broken your heart."

Jacob shook his head. He could not speak his ecstasy to this unsympathetic person from Plymouth. Some day, perhaps, he would try to write of it.

"I loathe London," was all he found to say, and evidently the stranger found Jacob no less failing in understanding than Jacob had found the stranger, for he made no other remark, and presently went back to his own compartment. Jacob saw him there later, idly turning over the pages of an illustrated magazine, and generously pitied the man for his blindness. He was happily unconscious of spiritual snobbery. The glory of his new title to life was such a dazzling affair. . . .

And the day that had so magnificently blossomed at Dawlish was not destined to droop prematurely. His friend, Hubert Meredith, met him at Newquay, and announced his intention of coming out to Trevarrian and seeing him comfortably settled in his new quarters.

"You'll find the Cornish people a little difficult at first," Meredith said; "but once they accept you, they are your friends for life."

Jacob felt that he was coming to a strange country and strange people. If he had been alone, he would have been intimidated by the thought of all the energy and initiative that would be required of him before he could settle down to some kind of routine in this alien place. Meredith's offer of help instantly relieved that fear. Alone, Jacob suffered strange spasms of helplessness; with an audience, even a passive one, he was equal to an undertaking that might be increased in proportion to the amount of admiration he received.

Meredith proved to be a rare cicerone. He talked of the town of Newquay as they drove a mile in the wrong direction in order to send a telegram to Betty—Newquay was almost negligible from his point of view—but after they had turned into Porth, he offered no tedious topographical introductions; he waited—a little anxiously, perhaps—to judge the effect of the place upon his companion.

Jacob's response was all that any critic could have desired. He, too, was silent, thrilling to some appeal he could not as yet understand; some hitherto hidden expression of the Celtic strain in him that in all his thirty-four years of life had been

forced to seek another outlet, and had peered out, cramped, distorted, almost unrecognisable.

Here was an aspect of himself that he had never understood, that he was still unable to understand without another's help. He had known that he was capable of curious emotions, had even taken a secret joy in them; but he had believed these responses to be a form of weakness, something to be fought against and conquered. Many times in his life he had sought relief from the burdens that threatened to break him by taking queer, lonely pilgrimages into some piece of country unknown to him; futile explorations that had been made when his duty had plainly forbidden any release from the routine of necessary work. He had on such occasions played truant from his office, trying to console himself with the thought that these excursions were essential as a relief from the pressure of anxiety, opposing the vague stir of conscience that suggested laziness, inertia, as the true desire of his mind. Never had he traced these sudden flights from duty to any impulse of a primitive wander-lust, to any inborn eagerness to throw off the bonds of necessity and march out, unshackled, into the free spaces of earth. The desire had moved feebly within him, like a child in the womb, and he had restlessly shaken himself, desiring to quiet the irk and pain of its struggle.

And even now, when no duty withheld him, he feared the familiar emotion to this response to beauty as some wild, incomprehensible thing that was antagonistic to his well-being; something to be ashamed of, something that must be repressed. But now, for the first time, the emotion was too strong for him.

The waggonette had climbed the hill, crossed the open spaces of the common, and now faced the descent of the winding road that seemed as if it must lead straight over the cliff's edge. Below, the wide blue of the Atlantic lay spread in one brilliant field to the deep horizon, until their approach revealed the broad curves of its laced border, where the eternal procession of little waves laid, one by one, a pattern of whitest, vanishing foam on the golden-brown bed of the shell beach.

The sound of it came to them on the heights as a tiny recurrent crash, with whispered undertones, a hesitating little melody endlessly repeated, that held always one dragging moment of suspense. To the right of them the crooked valley lay between broken hills that stood high-shouldered and, as it were, with something of obstinate resolution and aloofness, savagely patient in their age-long expectation of invasion by the creeping strength of that delicately threatening sea.

Jacob leaned far over the side of the waggonette, trying to hide the inexplicable tears that had sprung to his eyes. His spirit shouted that all this beauty was his for just as long as he cared to stay and enjoy it.

2.

The consciousness of all this sheer gain, this added interest in life, served to relieve in some degree the perplexities and small labours that confronted him before he could count himself settled in the house that Meredith had taken for him. In another mood, Jacob would have hesitated before the unfamiliar duties that were necessarily to become a part of his new life. He had never cooked a meal for himself, nor ordered the materials for it direct from tradesmen, and the whole complicated domestic problem appeared at first sight as terrifyingly mysterious and difficult. In London he had contemplated this problem without dismay; he had pictured some accessible general shop from which he might order everything that he required; had conceived an ideal of the woman who was to "do for" him as a resourceful, willing creature, who would be always at his beck and call.

The reality that faced him soon dissolved these illusions. The one tiny shop in the hamlet of Trevarrian was almost useless—onions, ginger-beer, yellow soap, and oil, proved on inquiry to be the only produce he was ever likely to require from it, and the hopeful qualification that they "belonged to" keep tinned salmon was of little material assistance.

"Where can I get bread and meat and groceries and things, then?" asked Jacob, with a touch of anxiety, and learned

that a baker came over from St. Columb twice a week, a butcher from Newquay once a week, and a grocer, also from Newquay, once a fortnight. The grocer alone was particularised by name as Mr. Stout—a distinction accorded to him, Jacob found later, in deference to his position as a local preacher of some note.

The proprietress of the tiny shop seemed to give this information with a show of uncertainty, even of unwillingness. Her "There do be a baker as comes over from St. Cullum" had a contemptuous significance to Jacob's ears.

"Is there anything wrong with his bread?" he asked, a question that was met with a look of surprise; but Meredith cut in by saying:

"Can you tell us where to find Mrs. Andrew? She is going to 'do' for my friend, I believe."

"Aw! yes, she'm a few doors up the street," replied Miss Curnow carelessly. "She be poaly, though, they tell me."

Jacob was conscious of an enormous helplessness. Had he been alone, he might even have returned to Newquay rather than face the blankness of this reception; but with Meredith at his elbow, and the glow of that delight waiting to be enjoyed when these perplexities were unravelled, he was able to overcome the inertia that would have paralysed him in other circumstances.

"Can't we go up to the farm and see Mrs. Olver?" he suggested to Meredith. Mr. Olver was his landlord.

"That shop doesn't seem particularly anxious to do business with me," he remarked when they were outside.

"Oh, that's nothing!" returned Meredith. "They're always like that at first. Even in the towns they give you the feeling that they would rather not serve you. But I am a little surprised that Mrs. Olver hasn't got the place more ready for you, and ordered provisions."

"And where are we to find a substitute for Mrs. Andrew, who is poorly, they tell me?"

"We'll ask Mrs. Olver," said Meredith.

"It's all an immense joke, of course," Jacob went on gaily,

upholding himself in his newly-found courage, and consciously delighting in it.

"That's the only way to take it," Meredith agreed.

Mrs. Olver, however, an old lady of nearly seventy, proved a present help in trouble. She was shocked to hear that no preparations beyond an unlocked door and a fire in the kitchen had been made for her new tenant.

"Why, I give Mrs. Andrew the things myself!" she said, and went on rapidly to explain that she would have superintended everything personally, had she not been suddenly called away to visit a daughter in Padstow, a journey from which she had but that moment returned.

"I hear that Mrs. Andrew is ill," put in Jacob, when an opening was at last presented.

Little Mrs. Olver's face crumpled into a perplexed frown.

"She isn't 'ealthy, but 'er 'usband works for us," were the only relevant statements in her long reply.

"Is there another woman in the place who could do the work for me?" asked Jacob, and found himself involved in an intricate piece of local history.

Trevarrian, with its thirty inhabitants, was, it appeared, mainly divided into two camps. Two years ago there had been a lawsuit in St. Columb, an action for assault, defended by a counter-action that brought a charge of theft against the complainant. Unhappily, neither action had succeeded, and each party had had to pay its own costs, and so the feud between the families of Andrew and Curnow remained undecided, leaving a permanent cause of quarrel.

"Of course, it 'asn't anything to do with us," Mrs. Olver explained, permitting her hearers to see that the Olvers were, by virtue of their class and position, far removed from any personal interest in the petty intrigues of their inferiors. "But Mrs. Andrew's 'usband works for us, and if I was to recommend you Millie Curnow, Mrs. Andrew might make trouble."

"But you think Mrs. Curnow . . ."

"She isn't been married," explained Mrs. Olver. "She's been unfortunate, poor girl!"

Meredith understood. "She's got a child to look after, then?" he asked.

"Two," Mrs. Olver admitted; "but the youngest is nearly four, and she lives with her family."

"Then you think that Miss Curnow . . ." Jacob began again.

"Well, you mustn't take it from me, you know," said old Mrs. Olver, "and you mustn't mention my name."

"I see," put in Meredith quickly. "And about bread and butter, and milk and eggs . . .?"

Mrs. Olver was prepared to supply her tenant with anything he needed at the moment, if only he would not mention her name to Millie Curnow.

"Perhaps we'd better look in on Mrs. Andrew," suggested Meredith; and Mrs. Olver indicated the required house from her own front door.

Millie Curnow's direction alone would have been quite useless, for, indeed, there was nothing that could have been dignified by the name of a street. The three or four rugged groups of cottages, the Olver's house, a smaller farm, and the little inn that turned its back on the hamlet and alone faced the main road, were clustered here and there with no relation to each other. They might have been square boulders fallen haphazard from some vanished cliff, and converted to dwelling-houses by the simplest possible process. The material of the two cottages in one of which lived the ailing Mrs. Andrew (the other was empty and ruinous) had without question been quarried from the slope that lifted it above the road, for the cottage was perched within a few feet of the edge of a miniature cliff that presented a rock face of precisely similar quality to that of the building itself. But the whole village had evidently grown out of the rock, which in its natural, unquarried condition formed the visible foundation of most of the houses, in some cases roughly bonded into the masonry of the walls two or three feet above the general ground level.

"It's tremendously picturesque," was Jacob's comment; and he looked across with a certain satisfaction at the house

he had taken, standing two hundred yards away from the village. Like the other houses, it was a cubical piece of grey stone, pierced with small windows, and covered by a low-pitched roof of blue slate, relieved by patches of golden lichen. But on that side of the valley there was, at least, some deposit of earth above the rock, and a grass road led to his front gate. There was even something that might be described as a garden.

The village itself was a sheer quarry.

"People say it's rather like some of the villages in the West of Ireland," remarked Meredith.

"Is it? I like it," replied Jacob.

The tide of his domestic misfortunes had begun to ebb from the time of his visit to Mrs. Olver. Mrs. Andrew, they found, was temporarily confined to her bed, and quite unable to work for him; and so, in place of that respectable slattern, he was enabled to bespeak the services of Millie Curnow—unfortunate, no doubt, but, as he was to find, clean, competent, and willing.

She was more complacent when they returned to beg her assistance. It is true that she made some demur, and finally accepted only on condition that her hours should be from 9.30 to 11 a.m., and from 6 to 7 p.m., the only time she could spare; but she volunteered to order Jacob's provisions for him from the travelling tradesmen, and to take them in if he should be out when they called—a great relief, for he had pictured himself miserably glued to his front door for at least three afternoons a week, waiting to catch these casual purveyors as they passed through the village. Furthermore, she was willing to begin her duties at once, come in, air the bed, and perform any other work that might be required; finally, to bring some oil, the one useful commodity she could supply from her store.

Now that his difficulties were overcome, Jacob could surrender himself still more freely to the feeling of adventure and romance that had been with him throughout the day. He had a sense of having triumphed over circumstance, and he savoured the sweetness of the air and the murmur of the

sea that came to them from Beacon Cave, half a mile away down the valley.

"By Jove! this is a ripping place!" he said.

"Good!" murmured Meredith, and explained himself by adding: "I wasn't quite sure how it would strike you. I was rather afraid you might not like it. It's such a responsibility taking a place for another man, and I was a little uncertain—about *you*, you know; I've only seen you in London."

"Thank God to be out of London!" murmured Jacob.

"Yes; it was just that I didn't know about you."

"I don't think I knew it myself," replied Jacob.

One further piece of information completed the day for him.

"How light it is down here!" he had said to Meredith.

"It must be past eight. I suppose the air is so much clearer."

"Partly," Meredith had agreed, and had added: "And, of course, we're five degrees west of Greenwich, twenty minutes later in time."

Jacob felt that he was in another country, infinitely far removed from London.

If only he had Betty. . . . But she would come in three months. She had promised.

3.

And the ecstasy of that first evening gave colour to all the experience of the next few weeks. The sweet exhilaration of the morning air opened each day for him. He woke to a sense of joy in life, and found beauty in the crying of sea-gulls, the chatter of starlings, even in the raucous screams of the many geese that roamed perpetually about the village. The business of getting his own breakfast became a source of delight; he was so full of energy, so glad to have occupation.

"What I have always wanted," he thought, "was a spur to independence." He realised that even in his worst times he had been parasitic, as helpless as a slave-keeping ant; that he had hardly ever thought of the possibility of doing things for himself. The common business of life had been

made too easy for him, and when energy had been demanded, he had been too enervated to reply.

Here in Trevarrian he awoke each morning to the knowledge that he alone was responsible for himself. If his affairs went wrong, he had no one but himself to blame; and the sense of his independence, and the pride he took in his competency to perform the little necessary duties of life—such things as the lighting of fires, the provision for his meals, and the cooking of them—gave him confidence, a sense of ability, and the energy for that more familiar routine of earning a living, chiefly by reviewing for the *Daily Post*.

Moreover, the development of his novel began to attract him more and more. With his usual habit of self-depreciation, he regarded the work as little likely to be taken by a publisher, but he took an increasing pleasure in the writing of it.

The story came so easily. He found himself in the position of a witness and recorder rather than in that of a creator. The phenomenon interested and at the same time slightly scared him. It seemed so possible that at any moment this unfolding might cease and leave him without material.

He saw that the detail of the story was provided by the experience of his own life; yet the central character, John Tristram, that boy who had struggled with fear in the night, differed in so many ways from himself. It was as if the writer stood outside his own personality, to select certain traits and reject others.

The setting, also, was the familiar village of Ashby-Sutton, in which Jacob had lived; but Tristram had been lifted in the social scale, and figured as the son of the Rector—the latter a frank portrait of the man who had been Jacob's tutor.

These differences, which seemed so considerable to himself, gave the story an air of adventure. He felt that he was writing a romance that had nothing in common with so tedious a business as autobiography. In the next chapter some delightfully unforeseen development might be awaiting him, and he was eager to explore the further history of his hero, and to share with him those new experiences that were

so like and yet so unlike his own. And, above all, he was fascinated by the realisation that the story he was writing was so unlike the conventional ideal of the novel. He had not read Flaubert or the Russians, and in 1897 there was no English realist to provide him with a model. Nevertheless, the thought that he was a pioneer of an English school of realism never suggested itself; indeed, there were days when he sought eagerly for the precedent of some convention to give countenance to a method that he imagined might be breaking some essential rule of the novelist's art. His story, interesting as he believed it to be in the verisimilitude of the detail, appeared so purposeless to him in his more critical moods. It led up to no possible climax; it hardly developed the character of his hero—certainly not towards any accepted ideal of the triumph of virtue, or the final degradation of vice. It did not, so far as he could judge, express any very distinctive attitude of his own.

All these failures he regarded as quite reprehensible faults, but when he attempted by a deliberate effort of concentration to bend his story towards a foreseen and inferentially desirable end, all the drama and movement of it fell suddenly flat and stale; the life and reality were paralysed, and his hero became a feeble doll jerking at the end of an all too visible wire.

Jacob consoled himself with the thought that he need never send in his manuscript to a publisher. The writing of the book was experience, a lesson in technique; he would finish it, and then put it aside. No one but himself and Betty should ever know he had written it. He would, of course, read it to Betty. He was writing it for her, and when she came they could talk it over together.

4.

Sometimes he approached the subject obliquely when he was with Meredith, by discussing the purpose and method of the novel; but Meredith was inclined to shirk the argument. He was, he explained, just finishing another novel himself,

and was afraid of any suggestion that might invade his present clear conception of the last three or four chapters. He advanced the same reason when Jacob asked if he might be allowed to read the novel in question.

"When it's finished I shall be tremendously glad if you'll bother to read it," Meredith said; "but it's absolutely fatal to show a book to anyone while you're writing it. Any criticism upsets you, whether it's justified or not; and it's no good, absolutely no good whatever, then. It may help you to write a better book next time; but if once you begin to tinker with the thing you've done, it's all up—at least, that's my experience."

That pronouncement effectually closed the way against all possible confidences of Jacob's for the time being, and it was not until nearly the end of October that he dared his great experiment.

He had read Meredith's novel in typescript, and was dreading the necessity to give an opinion on it. The book had not interested him, had not aroused in him one flush of enthusiasm. Here was the classical form that was so impossible to himself, and the steady flow of careful, rather wordy prose that always expressed the writer's well-marked literary style, even when it purported to be repeating the speech of characters, many of whom obviously differed in opinion, culture, and social position, both from the writer and from each other. Jacob was willing enough to admit the cleverness and the rather too evident artistry of the book, but the clear complaint he had to make was that the book did not live—that the effect produced was not that of life.

He remembered the discussion that he had had with Meredith twelve months before in Torrington Square—how long ago it seemed!—on precisely the same question, and found that he could only emphasise the arguments he had then tried to formulate. It appeared useless now to repeat that criticism, and he decided to give praise where it was due as enthusiastically as he was able, and then to speak of his own book. He had written already nearly sixty thousand words, and there was apparently no reason why he should

not write at least sixty thousand more. Meredith's novel, completed, was not more than one hundred thousand words. Jacob had made a careful computation, and was inclined to be proud of his own fecundity.

He walked over to Porth that afternoon, carrying Meredith's manuscript with him. He climbed down the cliffs on to the sands of Watergate Bay—wondering now that he had ever been daunted by that descent—and met Meredith at the foot of the Porth Steps, two miles farther along the beach.

"I was just coming over to you!" Meredith exclaimed.

"Oh, good! Come along," said Jacob, "and we can talk as we go. I've read your book. It's splendid! It discourages me dreadfully. It is so absolutely the sort of thing I couldn't ever do myself." He was looking out at the rippling edge of the calm sea, but he saw a picture of his old rooms in Torrington Square.

"Oh, I've said all that before," he went on quickly. "I wish I were more articulate." A sudden desire for confidence had seized him. This should have been Meredith's afternoon, but he wanted to make it his own. More than that, he wanted to know Meredith.

"We're all on the surface of things," he said hesitatingly.

"As how?" asked Meredith, with a smile.

"You and I," Jacob explained. "Let's sit down a minute; I want to have this out."

But when they had found a comfortable rock, and Meredith had lighted his pipe, and Jacob a cigarette, the emotion that had been so near the surface a moment before, had become curiously difficult to express.

"I don't know," remarked Jacob, after a long pause.

"Is it about the book?" Meredith prompted him.

"Yes, about the book and you; it's all of a piece."

"I hope so," replied Meredith quietly.

"Well, the fact of the matter is," said Jacob, feeling oddly uncomfortable, and much as if he were making a proposal of marriage to some woman whose inclinations were quite unknown to him—"well, that there's something a little inhuman about your book."

"Sounds pretty dreadful," murmured Meredith.

"Well, look here," went on Jacob, "when we met—how long ago is it? two or three years, anyway—we sort of cottoned on to one another, and in the last three months or so we've met three or four times a week; but I'm hanged if I know any more of you—or you of me—than I did after ten minutes' talk at old Lee Perry's."

Meredith smoked reflectively. He seemed curiously unresponsive. "What more do you want to know?" he asked.

Jacob shrugged his shoulders. "There's a good deal of me you don't know, anyway," he said, "so I suppose the same's true of you."

"I think my books express all of me that is worth knowing," Meredith said.

"Do they?" muttered Jacob. He felt baffled and depressed. Here was a new example of his old experience. He had had so many heroes, representative of so many varying virtues, and they all had failed him in some respect. He thought of them—Farrell, Bradley, Cairns, Barker. There had been times when he had consciously tried to shape himself on their models, and always some revelation of them had succeeded, some aspect of incompleteness that had invalidated their heroism. Was the fault in himself? If so, was it a fault at all? Was it not rather an evidence of growth?

"What are you trying to get at?" asked Meredith unsympathetically.

Jacob shirked the straight issue; he was afraid of it. "I want to get at the meaning and . . . and the use of literature; and . . . oh! of life, I suppose," he said.

"I suppose we all want to do that," returned Meredith, without enthusiasm. "It's a largeish problem," he added.

"Well, why can't we discuss it?" said Jacob. "It may be futile, but it may help—may help *me* a bit, anyway."

"I'm quite willing. Fire away!" was the discouragement he received.

He hesitated a moment, frowning at the eager procession of little waves that endlessly hurried to curl and break and stretch a tongue of water up the sand, as if that were the

vital business for which they had come into being. They were of all kinds, those waves. Some seemed to become perplexed, were met too soon by the return of their predecessor, and broke ineffectually—retreated quickly and, as it were, ignominiously. Others were typically efficient, good average little waves, that must surely have retired with a quiet consciousness of work decently performed. And every now and again came a series—always three or four together—of bigger waves that overrode all opposition, that announced their consummation with a louder voice—intent, rather self-important waves, that had an air of showing how the thing should be done, so it seemed to Jacob. He saw himself as the wave that broke ineffectually, that exploded too soon.

“Why shouldn’t a novelist describe life as he sees it?” he asked.

“That’s what I try to do,” said Meredith.

“Transmuted, and all the rest of it, by your own temperament?”

“Necessarily.”

“I simply don’t understand all that stuff about art,” replied Jacob boldly. “Method, technique, yes. You’ve got to find words to express what you’ve seen, and you’ve got to join ’em up in decent grammatical order, so that they won’t offend your sense of—sequence, is it? But what I don’t understand is the necessity for translating all your impressions into a sort of phantasmagoria, a sort of general effect, and trying to hint that there’s a hidden value underneath it, if your readers will bother to look for it. . . .”

“Is this a criticism of me?” put in Meredith.

“I suppose so.” Jacob blurted out his assent, afraid lest he might be tempted to qualify it.

“That’s my natural form of expression, you see,” explained Meredith, after a little hesitation. “That’s the way I have to write—the only way in which I can get anywhere near expressing what I want to say.”

“Then I think you ought to write verse or essays,” said Jacob. “I don’t think the novel is your right medium.”

Meredith whistled. "Is that what you'll say if you get my book to review for the *Daily Post*?" he asked.

"Oh, Lord! I never thought of that," exclaimed Jacob. "That's a practical way of looking at it."

"Well, would you?"

"I don't suppose I should."

"Why not?"

"Probably because I haven't enough faith in my own critical ability," remarked Jacob, after a short consideration.

"You see, that's my trouble," he went on. "I don't know. I want to talk about all these things, and I'm afraid to say what I think, generally, because I know so jolly little."

"None of us knows much," commented Meredith.

And then the conversation was finally diverted from the subject of art in the abstract by Jacob's coming to the request he had had at the back of his mind throughout the discussion.

"You know a good deal more than I do, though," he said, "and I wish . . . I should be awfully glad if you would give me an opinion on the stuff I've done. I . . . I expect it's all utterly rotten, and I shan't mind your saying so in the least; but I'd like to know. It's hardly worth while going on if the book's no good at all."

"Rather! Of course I will," agreed Meredith quietly.

He was by no means a narrow-minded or small-hearted man; but, plodder as he was, he had something of the artist in him, and that something had been offended by the drastic criticism of himself as no novelist; for that was, in effect, the summary. The feeble strain of passion in him had been stirred to a mild resentment, which, weak as it was, was of the quality that endures.

Jacob, as usual, had been unhappy in his choice of the time and method for an attempt at plain speaking. He was content to admire and to agree for so long; but whenever he was stirred to opposition, he had the unfortunate knack of presenting himself as captious, self-opinionated, even rude. His qualifications, his assertions of ignorance, or sudden hesitations, in no way mitigated the effect. They appeared as a cloak care-

lessly assumed to cover the real man, so unexpectedly revealed. In one such expression of himself as that he had just given, Jacob could permanently injure the friendship of years.

He was conscious that he had blundered on the present occasion. "I suppose I am really rather an unpleasant character," was the way he expressed it in his thoughts.

5.

He saw now that he had been inept, almost insulting, and on the way back to Trevarrian he tried to make some amends; but Meredith, with no show of temper, and only indicating his hurt by a slight change of manner, would listen to no apology.

"Why try to take it back?" he asked. "You've a perfect right to your own opinion, and you were obviously saying what you meant to say. Honestly, I prefer that you should be candid."

Jacob was fumbling in his mind for an explanation. He wanted Meredith to make allowances.

"You see," he got out at last, "for the last few weeks I've been rather engrossed in the thing I'm doing, and I suppose I was, in a sense, standing up for my own method; not that I really think it is a method, but, you know, I've been sort of hoping it might be. And when your book came along, it upset me, if you know what I mean—made me feel that all my stuff was rot, and—well, I had to defend it."

"Oh yes, obviously! Why apologise?" returned Meredith; and Jacob felt that his explanation had been quite useless. For a few minutes he nursed a sense of injury. Meredith could not understand, he thought, and went on to discover that that was what was wrong with Meredith as a novelist: he was out of sympathy with life somewhere. His confounded art was too academic; he was afraid to face realities.

And if the exhibition of his novel had depended upon Jacob's initiative, the manuscript would certainly not have been produced that evening. But after tea Meredith quietly insisted.

"You'll never be able to read my writing," protested Jacob.

"Would you like to read it aloud?"

"Good Lord, no! Not for the world!" Jacob was terrified at the mere suggestion.

"Well, let me have a look at it, anyway," said Meredith.

"As a matter of fact, I find your writing fairly easy to make out."

Jacob honestly tried to put him off.

And when the manuscript had at last been produced, he found that it was clearly impossible to sit in the same room with Meredith while he read it. He read so rapidly, and without the least change of expression; and when Jacob took up a book and tried to forget the ordeal he was undergoing, he found that Meredith's turning of the pages, his least movement, was utterly distracting.

"It's awfully good of you, but I really wish you wouldn't bother to read it," he said desperately, after the minutes of discomfort.

Meredith looked up. "You go and sit in the kitchen, and I'll get it finished before supper," he said.

Jacob took his advice, and presently talked to Millie Curnow as she washed up his dinner things. When she had gone, he began to get the supper.

At half-past seven he looked into the sitting-room.

"Have you finished?" he asked.

"Pretty nearly," replied Meredith, fluttering the twenty pages or so of foolscap that still remained.

"Oh, well, that's quite enough! The last bit wants re-writing," said Jacob. "Come on; everything's practically ready."

Meredith obeyed with a disgusting readiness.

"It's quite good, you know," he began, as soon as they had sat down to the bacon and eggs Jacob had cooked. He had all his meals in the kitchen for practical reasons.

Jacob looked up eagerly. "Do you really think so?" he asked.

"Oh yes. For that kind of thing, I think it's decidedly good," said Meredith.

"What kind?"

"Realistic fiction. Haven't you read *Madame Bovary*?" Jacob was obliged to admit that he had not.

"It's a recognised school, you know," Meredith continued. "I don't quite know anyone in England who's doing it, but it's recognised in France, of course. I don't quite know how to define it, but perhaps the main distinction is in the choice of the typical incidents and emotions. The realists don't concentrate on the larger emotions, you see—quite the reverse; they find the common feelings and happenings of everyday life more representative. You may have a big scene, but the essential thing is the accurate presentation of the commonplace."

"Yes, I think that's pretty much what I *have* tried to do," commented Jacob. He was greatly relieved to learn that his was an accepted method. "I think that's what interests me. It's what I know of life. I've never murdered anyone, for instance, or talked to a murderer, and I don't know how it feels, or what one would do in a position of that sort."

"Oh, there are plenty of arguments for realism!" Meredith said, in a tone that implied he had no intention of reopening that discussion.

"And do you really think my stuff is passable—of its kind?" asked Jacob.

"Oh yes, quite," returned Meredith, with a repulsive flatness. "You see, I don't admire the school. I'm not in the least a proper person to criticise you. . . ."

"Any more than I am a proper person to criticise you?"

"Yes, that might follow, in a way."

It seemed that Meredith's criticism was finished, but Jacob wanted much more than that. "Do you mind my asking you a few questions?" he said, and was immediately conscious that Meredith also had written a book, and was probably equally anxious to talk about it. Yet the making of any sort of bargain was so obviously impossible.

"You see," Jacob went on quickly, "I'm such an absolute beginner, and I don't know anything about writing a novel yet. You *can* help me; I couldn't possibly presume to help

you. You've got there. You've published two books, and finished a third, and had splendid reviews, and fairly good sales . . ."

"I can't say that I've 'got there' yet," returned Meredith; "but never mind that. Go on with your questions; I'll tell you anything I can."

"Well, to begin with, does my book seem rather purposeless to you, and . . . and rather inconsequent?"

"No, it isn't at all inconsequent," Meredith decided, after a judicial pause. "There's the natural thread of Tristram's development—at least, of his growing older. As to being purposeless, it depends on what your particular purpose is. If it is just to show a little piece of life as you know it, you've done that; but I don't see that anything can come out of it. I mean that your piece is a slice cut off from the rest and put under a microscope. It hasn't any relation to the whole."

"I don't know the whole, you see," apologised Jacob.

Meredith avoided that difficult issue. "But you might have shown some thread of development, progress, advance towards a clearly conceived end," he suggested.

Jacob sighed. "When I try to do that," he said, "the whole thing becomes mechanical."

"One has to go on trying," was Meredith's platitudinous comment.

"I'm not that sort," Jacob admitted feebly. He realised the force of Meredith's illustration. It was true that he had put a piece of life under the microscope, and not related it to the whole. But he would have liked to point out that he did not pretend to be a genius, that his story had only been an attempt to do the thing that he thought he *could* do, and that he made no claim to having tried to write a masterpiece. What he had wanted Meredith to do was to give an opinion on the book as an item in that, no doubt, lower class to which it belonged.

And, with a growing resentment, Jacob was feeling that it was better to have done well what he had done—if he had done it well—than to have attempted to write a novel that was altogether beyond his powers, as, perhaps, Meredith had

tried to do. Jacob remembered those impressionist characters in his friend's book, composite portraits of rather stereotyped people, who never had lived and never could. That method was, perhaps, the way of escape. If your characters would become mechanical when you tried to force them into ready-made situations, you avoided the difficulty by using plastic models from the outset. . . .

The rest of the evening was spent in desultory conversation. Meredith left early.

"I'm going up to town at the end of the week," he said, as he was at the door. "I don't know whether I shall see you again before I go."

"Rotten!" was Jacob's comment. "Shall you be away long?"

"A month, I expect," Meredith said.

Jacob walked down the grass drive with him as far as the gate on to the road.

"I shall see you when you come back, of course?" he said.

"Of course," replied Meredith. He hesitated a moment, and then said: "Looks like rain, doesn't it? Well, good-bye."

"Good-bye, old chap," returned Jacob.

He stayed at the gate until he could hear no longer Meredith's footsteps on the road, and then sauntered back to the house. He was suddenly conscious of a feeling of depression, and when he entered the house it seemed unusually empty, inhospitable, gloomy.

He sighed as he bolted the front door behind him.

The lamp in the sitting-room had not been filled that morning and was burning low. A little puff of smoke came from the fireplace.

"Damn that chimney!" Jacob said aloud. "I hope to goodness it isn't going to smoke again!" He looked at the lamp and mentally cursed that also. He must not get into the habit of talking aloud in his solitude, he thought.

He wished that Betty was there. Her time was nearly up, but she had said nothing in her letters as to any particular date on which he might expect her.

She might not come !

He looked round the darkening sitting-room with a new sense of disgust. If she did not come after all, he could never stand this place alone all the winter. But she must—oh, surely she would come ! She had promised.

He saw the manuscript of his novel on the table, sighed again and shrugged his shoulders. He saw now that it was poor stuff. He had not needed Meredith's criticism to tell him that.

6.

He woke the next morning to the consciousness of some unaccountable misery that waited upon him. It was hardly light yet, and the rain was crashing violently against the window by his bed. He had kept that window closed while he slept, ever since he had been awakened one September night by a perfect douche of cold water. It had amused him then to see that the force of the squall had driven the rain clear across the room and wetted the farther wall. It was another of those phenomena, peculiar to this strange, adventurous county of Cornwall. He liked to remember that he was on a peninsula stretching out into the Atlantic, and that he might at any time witness some prodigious manifestation of natural forces.

This morning, the dull gloom of the sky and the shattering onslaught of the squall only added to his dejection. He got up, closed the little window at the other end of the room, and then returned to bed. He was wide awake, and had no further inclination to sleep, but the thought of going down to light the kitchen fire brought a feeling of weariness and disgust.

Something had been taken from him. The book upon which he had spent so much time, was a futility. He had told himself that it would never be submitted to a publisher, but he recognised the foolishness of that deception this morning. Subconsciously, he had always pictured his book in the hands of discriminating reviewers and an admiring public. But that was not all—not a half of the trouble that faced him. Betty

was not coming. He felt perfectly certain now that he would never see her again. This mood of his was not depression; there was no particular cause why he should be more depressed to-day than any other day; it was a realisation of facts. He had been living in a fool's paradise, and now he saw things clearly.

He was a failure. He had always been a failure, and only the deceptive workings of his imagination had ever stood between him and the realisation. He fooled himself into a false belief in his own virtues and ability. He had neither, and there were moments when he stood naked before his own judgment, and saw himself as he was. He would certainly gravitate at last to his proper level, the gutter, as a man he had once known had fallen before him. He began mentally to write a realistic account of his descent, that ended surprisingly with his resuscitation on the publication of "one of the most wonderful pieces of descriptive writing ever given to the world," as an imaginary reviewer of his, described the work.

He got up then, with a sort of vicious determination; and as it was not of the least consequence what he did that morning, abused himself aloud as he dressed. There was no one to overhear him; the nearest cottage was three or four hundred yards away.

"Silly, dreaming idiot!" he said brutally, to the sunburnt image in the looking-glass. . . .

The sitting-room fire smoked. He had known that it would, with the wind in the south-west and blowing a gale; but he made an experiment, nevertheless, and was half choked in the attempt. That chimney was another of the curiosities peculiar to Trevarrian. In the gusts of a wind such as this, the flames roared out into the room through the bottom bars of the grate, and blew the ashes over the hearthrug, even up on to the table. There was only one remedy—a partial one at best—and that was to sit with the window closed and the door of the sitting-room and the inner and outer doors of the kitchen all wide open. This method necessitated sitting in an overcoat; the carpet billowed up, sometimes moving

the chairs, and everything in the house banged and crashed in the hurricane that hurled through the passages—a hardly bearable discomfort.

There was nothing for it to-day but to sit in the kitchen, a bare, stone-flagged, badly lighted place, with whitewashed walls, and ill-fitting outer door that opened direct into the yard.

He gave up all thought of work with a faint sense of relief at the unquestionable validity of his excuse—an excuse good enough, surely, to satisfy even that cursed demon of conscience that sat on his shoulders and for ever goaded him to the exertion he found it so hard to make. But no alternative held out any prospect of enjoyment. He meant to read some book that was not for review, preferably some book that he had read before; but when he turned over his very limited stock, he hated the sight of them all. Not one of them offered the least hope of distraction from the misery of his surroundings. . . .

He went to the front door after Millie Curnow had gone, and looked out, wondering whether it would be worth while to face the rain that drove horizontally across the grass drive before him and obscured all sight of the village. So fierce, indeed, was the wind that on this, the sheltered side of the house, he could walk out two or three yards into the open without getting wet.

“Couldn’t face it,” he decided, and filled half an hour by boiling some water, and shaving.

At a quarter to twelve a postman arrived and brought a letter from Betty; but he found nothing in it to relieve his depression. She gave him an account of her meeting with Freda Cairns and Philip Laurence, and Jacob wondered whether Betty had not been adversely influenced by her sight of that ménage. Plainly, the flouting of the marriage service had not been a great success in that case, and she might make an altogether false application of the instance.

He sat down to answer her letter at once—the wall letter-box was cleared at half-past two—but a sense of wasted

effort overcame him after he tried to point out that she must not be influenced by her sight of the Laurences. Moreover, any argument of that kind inevitably led to pleading his own case, and he had promised not to put any compulsion upon her. She must come of her own free will; she must willingly fulfil her promise, or there could be no happiness for either of them. He had seen that once so clearly that he could never forget it. He saw at that moment, with perfect distinctness, the very shape of the domino score he had obliterated on the marble table of the little restaurant in Holborn. . . .

What he wrote was, he knew, a merely perfunctory answer to her letter, and he found great difficulty in expressing himself. There were several "doubles" he noticed, but he could not bother to alter his phrases. After all, it would make no difference to anyone what he wrote.

The journey back from the pillar-box was an adventure. He was forced to keep his face hidden, for the rain stung like driven sand, and more than once in his short journey he had to stop and brace himself against some fiercer gust that threatened to blow him off his feet.

He gasped with relief as he reached the lee of the house, but he was slightly invigorated by the struggle. He could hear the dull thunder of the sea at Livelow as an intermittent theme that filled the intervals when the wild shouting of the gale dropped momentarily to a less aggressive note; and in those intervals he could hear, too, a dull, reverberating boom overhead, as though the whole vast shell of the sky had been wonderfully rung by the enormous onslaught of the wind.

"Gad, what a day!" muttered Jacob, with a touch of glee. He wished that he could watch the sea, but he knew that even if he could battle his way down the half-mile of valley that separated him from Livelow, he would not be able to open his eyes in face of the tearing spray that would be hurled at him. He had caught a glimpse of a white tongue, that had leaped above a rent in the cliffs as he had fought his way back from the post, and the cliff even at that gap was nearly a hundred feet above high-water mark. . . .

At half-past five came a perceptible lull, and when a few

minutes later the uproar began again it had another note, and the kitchen door no longer chattered.

"Got back to the south a bit," said Jacob aloud. "I wonder if I could get that fire to go now."

He went into the sitting-room and held a lighted match up the chimney. The flame was almost instantly extinguished, but it leapt up now instead of down. "Good!" murmured Jacob, and started the fire, which immediately began to roar fiercely. For, as Jacob had learned, a variation of a few points in the direction of the wind meant the difference between a tremendous down-draught and an equally powerful up-draught.

When Millie Curnow came to wash up at six o'clock, she found Jacob taking a sort of proprietorial pride in the force of the storm.

"It 'as been rough," she agreed. "Mr. Olivers 'ad one of his ricks blown down."

"You don't often get it as bad as this, I suppose?" suggested Jacob.

"'Twas worse'n this a year back, last March month," said Miss Curnow. "There was a boat come in to Trevarrian sands then, and they couldn't use the rocket. Seven of'm drowned there was. Aw! that was a tur'ble gale, sure 'nough. Worst we've 'ad in forty years, they tell me. . . ."

7.

The next day the wind had abated somewhat, but it had veered in the night, and it was again impossible to light the sitting-room fire.

Jacob mooned about the house most of the morning—it was too wet to go out; but after the post had come, bringing him two review proofs and his copy of yesterday's paper, he had a sudden inclination to work, took out the manuscript of his novel, and read through three or four of the earlier chapters.

"It isn't half bad," he said modestly—"not half bad. I think I'll go on with it, anyway. Damn Meredith! he's prejudiced." And then he once more registered a vow that he

must give up talking to himself. "It's a sign of madness," he said aloud, as though he would impress the sub-conscious listener he presumably addressed. "You'll have to chuck it," he continued, and added: "I wonder how often I do it without noticing." On this occasion he took preventive measures by persistently whistling.

He did not do much work that day. He had come to the end of a chapter, and was uncertain of his material for the next. But after supper he found his imagination playing with a development that might come later in the book, and he decided to write this more interesting material at once and fill in the gap afterwards. Some argument with that ghostly mentor of his was necessary before this plan was settled. He had a guilty feeling that he was shirking the harder task, and he had to make it quite clear that if he did not write that chapter while it was fresh and bright in his mind, he would forget the essential touches. Conclusively, if he did not do this, he would probably do nothing at all. It was almost a threat.

He went to bed with a rather triumphant sense of having scored.

And when he woke in the morning, the wind had dropped and the sky was clear. When he had dressed he went into one of the unused bedrooms in the front of the house and watched the day break. He thought he would like to write the story of a man who had lain in the gorse all night and longed for the sunrise, describing all the exquisite slow process of the dawn. "But things of that sort aren't saleable," he reflected, as he cooked his breakfast.

Nevertheless, he attempted a few phrases of the story before he began his new chapter.

He was warm with enthusiasm when the postman came and brought him another letter from Betty.

The contents of it effectually damped his momentary elation. She was going to her sister's wedding the next day, and she had been unable to find another partner for Mrs. Parmenter. Those were her only items of news, which Jacob coupled, putting upon them the worst possible construction. In effect she was going to break her promise. She was not

coming. Two days ago he had thought that this was in her mind, but since then hope had revived. Now he was finally certain. And she had not had the courage to tell him openly; she had tried to prepare him by this ominous letter—the whole tone of it was formal, unaffectionate.

What was he to do? That was the bewildering, impossible problem that he had in some way to solve. Where could he go? Impossible for him to face the loneliness of a winter in this awful place; equally impossible to picture any other kind of life that could conceivably be even tolerable. He thought of London with loathing, and he hesitated for a time over the contemplation of a boarding-house at Newquay. He could have the sea and the rocks there, and yet find some sort of companionship—that he must have. That idea seemed almost possible, until he reflected that the boarder she would meet would almost certainly be old ladies and invalids. He could not go to the various boarding-houses and ask if anyone was staying there who would be glad to take a peculiar interest in a lonely man with literary ambitions. Sympathy was what he wanted. But it was just as well that Betty was not coming. If her love for him was not strong enough to overcome her little conventional scruples, they would certainly be miserable together. She would loathe the sight of him after a month.

He was such a poor creature. He had no grit, no big, fine qualities. It was obvious that he could never inspire a real affection in anyone. Also, he would get no dinner if he did not go and cook it. He only had to boil potatoes; there was some cold mutton in the house that Millie had baked yesterday morning. But he felt that boiling potatoes would be intolerably irksome just then, and the whole business involved laying the table. No, he could not be bothered. He would have eggs for supper. And his boots wanting mending. He had only one pair of brown boots, and he would have to walk a mile and a half across the fields to St. Mawgan in black boots—an unthinkable thing.

He would give up struggling with all these dreadful exigencies. He would wear his boots till they were worn out, and

then go barefoot. He would degenerate, take no more trouble about anything, let his work slide, and when he had no money left, he would turn tramp and beg.

He made a beginning by eating a dinner of bread and cheese, untidily, from the larder shelf. Afterwards he slouched down to Mawgan Porth, sat on a rock, and watched the tide come in. It was a warm, still afternoon, the beginning of that short spell of fine weather known as "St. Martin's Summer." . . .

Presently he fell to making a story of his misery, and then cursed himself as a hypocrite. "You deliberately slouched down there," he said to himself, "and now you're trying to turn the thing into literature. Oh, I wish to God you'd come real!" He stood up, and wondered if he could face drowning. "I don't believe I should mind it a bit," he thought, "I am so utterly sick of myself."

He might have made experiment at once, but a backward glance at the cliff discovered a coastguard leaning his elbows on the low, whitewashed wall that tied in the short line of staring cottages. And the knowledge that he was being watched not only induced a return of self-consciousness, but also started his introspective analysis on a new theme. "I'm so much more real," he thought, "when I'm with other people. It's when I'm by myself that I seem such a ghastly humbug."

His walk home exhibited no sign of a "slouch." He had forgotten the tramp ideal. But the sight of his empty house chilled and depressed him. "I must fight this," he thought, and determined to make an instant beginning by having toast for tea. Moreover, he would face the inevitable, and take those boots over to Mawgan the next day.

8.

He waited four days before he answered Betty's letter. In the interval he had returned to a more normal frame of mind. The weather was still warm and clear, and he had been down to Livelow every morning for half an hour after breakfast, and to Trevarrian sands or Bedruthan every afternoon. He had

avoided Mawgan Porth because he disliked the feeling that he was being watched by the coastguard. His boots, however, were still unmended. He had decided that it would be better to hire the Olvers' jingle and drive into Newquay, where he might buy a new pair of brown boots and leave the old ones to be properly re-soled—old Nye at Mawgan was only a cobbler, and clumsy at that.

He had put his book aside for the moment, but he had written four reviews for the *Daily Post*, and felt that he had not altogether wasted his time. But when he sat down to write to Betty, the old feeling of inertia and hopelessness overcame him again. What could he say? This was undoubtedly the critical moment, and therefore precisely the moment when he must leave the decision to her. And with that reflection his thoughts began to run in the old weary round, until he believed that he would be thankful to know certainly that it was impossible for her ever to come. The letter he wrote at last fully expressed, he thought, the effect of a tired mind, and he sent it with a faint hope that she might read his misery between the lines. He made no reference to the failure of her advertisement, because he felt that, if once he touched on that subject, he would be tempted to say too much.

Her reply, two days later, only served to confirm his most gloomy suspicions. It was certainly more affectionate than any she had written for some weeks, but no doubt she was afraid to make her announcement too abruptly. Perhaps she imagined that he would gradually forget her! That he had already forgotten her promise to come in three months. And the time was up within a day or two, and she made not the least reference to that perfectly definite arrangement; nor had she noticed the manner of his last letter. Perhaps she preferred to ignore it? Perhaps she had not read it?

A feeling of lassitude came over him that afternoon, very different in kind from the vexed inertia that was so familiar. His mentor seemed to be withdrawn from him, and he was no longer harassed by the thought of little duties left unperformed. He found this new sense of ease quite distinctly

pleasant. All his bothers were over. He was no longer perplexed and harried by the necessity to do the things he disliked, such infernally worrying things as ordering the Olvers' jingle, for example. He could let things slide now; nothing mattered. He had often wondered how it was that any man could sink as low as that fellow Woodhouse had sunk. Well, he knew at last. Woodhouse and his like had no mentor. Lucky devils! He was a lucky devil himself now. He had only one fear—his cursed mentor might return.

But the days passed, and still he remained in peace. He did no work, he ate his meals anyhow, he gave up shaving, and his conscience was free of the least offence. The weather had broken up, but the wind was in the north-east; and although it blew the rain in under the front door, the sitting-room fire did not smoke.

And with this blessed change of mood, a new relation to life generally was growing up. He was, he thought, becoming more real, himself—he was certainly vexed no longer by any consciousness of hypocrisy—and at the same time the things about him were becoming almost fantastically *unreal*. He often looked at the furniture in his sitting-room and wondered why it was there. Plainly, it had no connection whatever with himself. Once or twice his interest was sufficiently stirred to get up and feel the outlines of a chair-back, but he found that his sense of touch afforded him no more satisfaction than the sight of the thing. The chair might be there or it might not; he could not possibly be sure either way.

He had the same feeling, intensified if anything, about the cliffs and the sea. They had all the appearance of being illusory. The "head" at Mawgan Porth, for example, was just a flat outline against the sky in some lights. Was that the real cliff, or was it more real when you saw the crevices and broken spurs of rock in the full sunshine? The problem did not worry him in any way, it merely furnished material for idle speculation; but he found that he was forming a habit of touching things. One night he got out of bed to touch the chest of drawers. . . .

His boot-soles were wearing so thin that he walked with great circumspection, avoiding the stones. His boots were certainly becoming less real, he thought, and chuckled over what seemed to him a very subtle point of humour.

9.

On Sunday morning, the fourteenth of November, he awoke to a knowledge of change and oppression. The old note of the wind had returned, the rain was slashing at the window by his bed, and he could hear, downstairs, the protesting chatter of the kitchen door. But these ominous symptoms threatened him at the moment less than some vague disaster; the realisation still hung on the border of consciousness, a threat that suddenly sprung up, a vivid cause for self-denunciation.

"Good God, I've never had those boots mended!" he said aloud.

He sat up in bed and rumbled his already untidy hair. Those boots were in the foreground of his mind, but only as the head of a procession of neglected things—among them an unopened parcel of books from the *Daily Post*. Further reflection disclosed the fact that he had written a short note to Betty some days ago and had, as yet, received no reply.

He shook his head wearily. Life was revealed to him as one enormous task that he had no energy to tackle. Ten days' complete idleness had left him hopelessly in arrears. He could never make up all that lost time, never straighten out the infinite muddle of his affairs. If only he could begin again, he would have a chance. If he could leave England, cut himself off from all the old associations, and start by working as a carpenter, say, or even a common labourer.

In any case he would have to get a new pair of boots, and that was out of the question to-day. He could not drive to Newquay in this weather—"Atlantic weather," he called it, with a certain pride in its violence. The other end of the room was simply flooded.

He got out of bed reluctantly and closed the farther window,

stood shivering for a moment, and then went into one of the front rooms and had a cold bath.

Presently he stood for a time before the glass, and contemplated the repulsive sight of his ten-day-old beard.

He found that his razors were rusting; he had meant to put some grease on them, and had forgotten, or thought of it at the wrong moment or something. Nevertheless, he shaved after breakfast, and, as he afterwards ruefully rubbed his sore skin, reflected that he would have to buy a couple of new razors when he went into Newquay. There were several things that he must get when he went into Newquay; but that journey was out of the question to-day.

He did not attempt to light the sitting-room fire. When he went into that room after breakfast, he found the ashes of last night blown over the hearthrug, and a strong smell of soot prevailed. He opened the window and took the unopened parcel of books into the kitchen.

The Atlantic weather had apparently come to stay, but as the week went by he recovered a little courage, a faint energy to oppose the tremendous conflict of life. He had begun a kind of diary that gave him a little relief. He knew that it was carelessly written, and he wished that he had sufficient powers of concentration to make it a worthy testament; but his mind was too dull and tired to do that—no metaphors came to him—and at least it was something to have a means of expression, however feeble.

He had only one desperate hope left now—the hope that Betty might be induced to come and help him. He would not take the next step, he would leave her, as he had promised, uninfluenced; but he could write to her day by day in this diary of his, and possibly he might send it to her in certain eventualities. He need not decide that as yet. In any event, he would wait until she wrote to him again.

And at night, when the wind had shifted a point or two, and he could light the sitting-room fire, he had moments that were glorified by a mirage in which Betty wrote at last to say that she was coming; that everything was arranged; that she could no longer bear to live without him; that he was to meet

her by the 6.25 at Newquay. He pictured all the essential details, even his explanations to the Olvers and Millie Curnow. He had told them long ago that he was married, and that his wife might come to join him later on, and had skilfully intimated money difficulties, giving them a hint that his wife was working in London. . . .

Her letter came to him on Thursday morning. Everything had looked brighter that day. The wind had gone down, and he had been able to light the sitting-room fire. He was writing a review when the postman came, but Jacob stopped and talked to him for a minute or two about the weather, although that long-expected letter was come at last, and his hand tingled to the pressure of it.

He laughed when he had read it. She suggested another six months of waiting! He wondered what she would say if she could know what six months would mean to him. Six months more of this! Oh, well, that settled it! He would write and send her his diary, and then. . . .

He found his letter very difficult to express. The old perplexity had returned. He was using compulsion. This was the thing he had always meant to avoid. But he was determined that she must know, must realise what he had gone through. His diary would give her some idea of it. He need not write it again. But what *ought* he to do? What was the real, right thing? He found that he was aimlessly drawing capital "B's" on the paper in front of him, and got up quickly.

"I'll go down to Livelow and look at the sea," he said. "And perhaps I shall never come back," he added. . . .

He had never seen quite so magnificent a sea as the one that was breaking against the cliffs of Livelow that morning. The wind had fallen to a mere breeze, and huge rollers were coming in, their crests no longer teased and broken by the harry of the following gale.

The immense roar and crash of the breakers as they burst tremendously against the cliff, or leapt and fell tumultuously over some obstruction of submerged rock, put new heart into him. Here was incalculable force and energy, the wonderful

meeting of power and resistance. He leaned farther over the cliff's edge and let a fierce uprush of fine spray sting his face. This was the meaning of life—to oppose with all one's might, no matter whether one's expenditure of force showed any result or not. For how many thousand years had this wonderful sea battered vainly at these basalt rocks? The struggle had gone on for all known time, and would continue while wind and sea and earth remained. . . .

He remembered that he had sat on this very rock years ago, and how the sight of the sea had put fresh heart into him. "I have not lost my ideals," he had thought then; "they stretch out beyond the limits of this little world." And was that not still true? He had been so concerned with the small worries of life that he had forgotten his ideals. Now he must recover them. And the essential for him, the one clear need, was to fight. Oh! he would fight; not for any temporary gain, but for the welfare of his soul, for the sake of those ideals that were beyond space and time. He would go on battering at the senseless rocks, and be content with the knowledge that he had done what he could. He would not commit suicide, but he would send his diary to Betty; he would cease this useless prevarication and make one bold attempt to win her. If she came, and if she afterwards regretted her coming, he would take the responsibility, shoulder it, live with it, if necessary. . . .

Thank God for this great splendid sea! . . .

His mind was so full of resolution that he could not pause to re-write his letter, but on re-reading it he realised that Betty might find that it contained the threat of suicide. He could not allow that misapprehension. He was going to live now, even if he had to face the annoyance of old ladies and invalids in a Newquay boarding-house. So he added a paragraph which he thought would at least prevent any misunderstanding on that score. He left all the disfigurements, the line of meaningless capital letters and the rest, because he regarded them as evidence of his late weakness; and Betty must know everything. He would not actually threaten her, but she must understand. . . .

And there were forty-eight hours or so to be lived through before he could receive an answer. He turned back with splendid determination to his unfinished review.

10.

He had not received a telegram since he had been in Trevarrian, and did not recognise the un-uniformed boy on a bicycle who rode over from Mawgan Post Office.

"A telegram? For me?" he asked stupidly, and wondered vaguely if it were from Meredith. And even when he had read the message: "Coming by eleven train meet me Newquay.—Betty," he could not at once grasp the wonderful significance of it.

"There can't possibly be any answer," he said to the boy, who was interestedly watching the geese on the common.

The impossible had come to pass, and the suddenness of it almost stunned him. But, by Gad! he had a lot to do before she came—and she was coming to-day, to-day—she would be there to dinner that same blessed evening! Good Lord! he must tell Millie to get everything ready, and he must order the Olvers' waggonette. He must get some bacon in Newquay, and Heaven knew what else! Millie would know. . . .

"Oh! I want the waggonette, if I can have it—I must have it, if possible," he said to Mrs. Olver a quarter of an hour later, "to meet the 6.25 at Newquay to-night. My wife's coming. I had a wire this morning. She's—she's given up her work in London, and is coming down to spend the rest of the winter here. We—we really can't get on without one another any longer, you know. And can I have the waggonette about four o'clock, because I've a tremendous lot of things to get in Newquay before the train's due? Some boots for myself—and heaps of things."

Mrs. Olver showed no surprise nor any interest in his extraordinary news. One of her best fowls had been accidentally killed that morning.

BOOK IV
THE COLLABORATORS

X.

ARRIVAL

1.

JACOB's shopping in Newquay was finished long before Betty's train was due. He had been nervous and anxious during the drive, making repeated calculations of the time he supposed would be necessary for all that he had to do, and chafing at the slowness of the Olver's horse, the steepness of the hills, and the complete lack of sympathy exhibited by Andrews, the driver. Now he found himself with at least fifty endless minutes to be lived through, before the 6.25 could reasonably be expected.

He found a time-table in a dark corner of the station, and explored it with the help of a match. She would be between St. Blazey and Luxulyan at that moment, he calculated, and he made a note of the times at which she would reach Bugle, Roche, and St. Columb Road. He wondered whether she would be a little thrilled by those queer names, as he himself had been more than three months before; whether she would feel, as he had, that she was coming into a strange, romantic country?

But when he could see the headlights of the incoming train, he felt suddenly unprepared; he almost found it in his heart to wish that he might have had a little more time before he greeted her. Not until then had he realised the sense of her actual presence. He had spoken to her a hundred times in imagination during that interminable period of waiting; but now she seemed to him, in some indefinable way, a stranger, difficult to address, a little intimidating. . . .

She was in the through carriage at the back of the train, and she was already standing on the platform before he saw her. For one moment he had thought that she was not there, and the awful blankness of dread that had fallen on him had instantly dissipated any desire to postpone her coming. Nevertheless, he was very self-conscious as he said—

“So you’ve really come?” He could not have used any term of endearment just then, nor even have spoken her name.

She hardly looked at him.

“There’s a dress-basket thing in the van,” she said, without any form of greeting. “Could you find it?”

He was glad of an excuse for some activity, some opportunity to display his apprehension of her wish to postpone any approach to more intimate conversation until they were alone.

He missed her again when he had found the dress-basket and a porter to carry it out to the waggonette, but as he stared round with some bewilderment, she emerged from the shadow of the wall under which she had been standing, and came up to him.

“I couldn’t see you,” he said, with a laugh that was meant to be reassuringly commonplace, but that, even to his own ears, sounded a trifle hysterical. “Here, let me have that,” he went on quickly, and took the valise she was holding. “Nothing else, is there?”

She shook her head. “We have to drive, don’t we?” she asked.

“Drive? Rather!” he said; and, finding speech essential to cover his embarrassment, he continued: “It’s over four miles, you know, even if we go by Watergate Bay, and I don’t know whether Andrews will care to risk the hill going back. The other way, by Mawgan Cross, is nearly six, and there are a beastly lot of gates. . . .” He had a subject here, and made the most of it, including Andrews in his audience, when they reached the waggonette, by a discussion of routes.

“If you don’t mind walking up the hill,” he said to Betty, when some understanding had been reached, “we’ll go by Watergate. It’s much quicker.”

She shook her head again, and then, as if afraid her sign might be ambiguous, she added: "I don't mind."

"I expect you're pretty tired," he began, when they had started.

She nodded faintly, keeping her eyes down. She had not yet looked at him, so far as he knew. She seemed afraid to speak.

"You're not ill?" he asked, dropping his voice.

They were sitting facing each other, close under the lee of Andrews' back, and she gave a quick glance up at that inefficient shelter as she once more answered him by a movement of her head.

Jacob understood her suggestion that her every word must be overheard, but he wondered if her policy were a wise one. If Andrews were able to draw any inferences from their behaviour, it was surely better for them to talk. They were supposed to have been married for years, and a long separated, and presumably desolated, husband and wife would hardly sit in absolute silence during a tedious four-mile drive immediately after their reunion. He fumbled for some reasonable account to lay before the driver, but found nothing more convincing than—

"You're absolutely tired out. . . ." He said it in a voice that was meant to reach Andrews, but it seemed a poor excuse for their silence, he thought.

"I am tired," Betty murmured; and after that he tried to contain the nervous excitement that with him demanded speech.

The night had been overcast as they drove out of the town; but as they came into Porth the clouds were thinning, and a rising moon, some three or four days short of the full, showed dimly through a blurred veil of scud. The sea was ebbing, but still high enough to cover the flat beach and send tiny tidal waves up the stream of the little river they were crossing.

Jacob, intensely conscious of everything about him, could keep silence no longer.

"It is rather a ripping place, don't you think?" he asked in a low voice.

Betty had apparently been unaware of her surroundings, and when he spoke she looked round at the sea and shivered.

"Are we nearly there?" she asked.

"I'm afraid not nearly," he said. "You're cold, aren't you?" and then, as the waggonette stopped, he added: "That's for us to get out. We shall have to walk up this hill. Do you mind? It may warm you a bit."

"I should like to walk," she said; and when he had helped her out of the waggonette, he drew her hand through his arm and hurried forward, so that they might be out of earshot of Andrews toiling leadenly behind them.

"You aren't sorry you've come?" Jacob asked a trifle anxiously, when he judged that his purpose was attained.

She looked back over her shoulder.

"He can't possibly hear," pleaded Jacob, with a first weak suggestion of irritation in his voice.

"No, of course I'm not sorry," she said. And then: "Please don't worry me yet. I shall be all right."

This was an ominous beginning, he thought, and the glow of life that had come to him since he had felt the joy of her actual presence, was momentarily chilled by a weak attack of the old perplexity. "If she had come against her will. . . ." But he would not consider that confusing, useless problem again. She had come. She was compromised, and no return was possible. They must face the future now with determination, with splendid courage and disregard of any other opinion. He had said to himself that he would take the responsibility. And he felt able to take it, at this very minute. He was full of vigour and pride. He had her, and he meant to keep her.

2.

He drew her closer to him. "Take off your left glove," he said; "I want to give you that ring. I've got it in my pocket."

"Must I wear it?" she asked.

"Must you?" he said. "But Betty . . . what do you mean?"

"Have you told the people in the village that we're married?" she said.

"I've told the Olvers—the farmer and his wife, you know—my landlord, and Millie Curnow, the woman who works for me."

"Of course they'll know it isn't true."

"Of course they won't." He wondered if she was dreading her reception, the possibility of a slight. "I've absolutely arranged all that," he went on. "They think that we're awfully poor, and that you've been working in London—that was true enough—while I came down here to write a book. It's a likely enough story surely. Besides, you don't know these people—they're not a bit curious about one, in the first place; and then, Mrs. Olver, for example, is quite a broad-minded woman in some ways, I should think."

"How do you mean?" asked Betty.

He was sorry that he had opened this aspect; he saw now that the parallel he had had in mind was hardly a complimentary one; but he tried to soften it as well as he could.

"Oh, I only meant that when I first came she said something to me about one of the women in the village who had got two illegitimate children, and she spoke quite nicely about her. She said that she had been unfortunate, that was all."

"Why did she mention her at all?"

"She recommended her to me—to do my work."

"Is that the woman you've got now—what was her name?"

"Millie Curnow. Yes." Jacob was aware that he had undoubtedly said the wrong thing.

Betty withdrew her hand from his arm. "Please give me the ring," she said coldly. "I'd sooner Mrs. Olver didn't think me 'unfortunate' too."

"Oh, Betty! . . ." he began; but he was interrupted by the sound of the waggonette coming after them at a trot.

"I didn't notice that we'd got to the top of the hill," said Jacob. . . .

Undoubtedly it was going to be a little difficult. When

they were on the way again he relapsed into silence, and tried to confront the new trouble as he saw it. She had come to him under stress of a threat, he supposed, and she was already regretting her sudden decision. They must have this out when they got back. He could persuade her then, convince her that she had done the right, the only thing. They would never have had this horrible misunderstanding if they had been alone, if they could have talked. His analysis was cut short by the touch of Betty's hand on his knee.

He put out his own hand eagerly and took hers, to find that she was not taking steps towards the understanding that was in his mind. She withdrew her hand and made a sign to him, touching her third finger.

He took the ring from his pocket and gave it to her. He had meant to put it on for her, to make some little ceremony in the doing of it, and he felt slightly aggrieved by the half-furtive way in which she slipped it on her finger and covered it quickly by putting on her glove. If only he could explain, if only he could put his arms round her. It would have been better in many ways if he had not met her at the station. . . .

He made no attempt to take her arm again as they toiled up the steep hill from Watergate Bay. They walked in silence, this time behind the lumbering waggonette. Indeed, he offered no further remark until they were jolting over the grass field that led up to the Trevarrian house.

"Here we are at last," he said then, making an effort to appear cheerful. Millie Curnow was standing at the open door, and he wondered how Betty would greet her, or if she would greet her at all.

And then one more surprise was added to the general unexpectedness of everything that had followed Betty's coming, for she was suddenly gracious and sweet to Millie, admired the house, begged Millie to show her where everything was kept, and, when she addressed Jacob, spoke with an easy familiarity, as if that awful drive had completely overcome any awkwardness she might naturally have felt after a three months' absence from him.

He recovered his spirits at once. Everything would be all right now. He realised that he was curiously nervous and excited still.

3.

The fatigue that Betty had admitted so readily during the drive seemed to have wonderfully vanished. She was full of brisk energy, impatient to set about the detail of household management. She examined the stock of china and the cooking apparatus, with many comments on the poverty of the supply. "How do you manage without a steamer?" she asked Millie. "And isn't there a fish-kettle?"

"We 'ave to use the saucepan, mum," Millie explained; but she appeared to sympathise with Betty's criticisms.

"Oh! you're over-civilised, you know," put in Jacob. He had entered the kitchen with no scruple as to the fitness of his presence there. That was a familiar living-room to him.

"You've no business in here at all," said Betty. "The front of the house is your place."

"Oh! I have all my meals in here," he returned; "and when the wind's in the south-west, I sometimes have to sit here all day."

"Well, you won't now," said Betty, with a laugh. "You go in and clear that table in the other room, so that we can lay the supper."

"Is it worth while? . . ." he began; but she clapped her hands at him, and cut him short by saying:

"That's *my* business. Now, will you go and clear up some of the mess on that table of yours?"

He went with a delighted sense that no trouble could ever touch him in future, if only Betty would be happy. And as he cleared the books and papers from his table, and made a praiseworthy attempt to straighten and tidy the room generally, it seemed to him that he and she could hardly fail to be happy there, with that jolly house all to themselves, and the glorious country and sea outside—all new ground for her, to be explored in his company. This was life, he thought, and savoured the exquisite intensity of it—the present,

realisable happiness, the perfect enjoyment of the moment that did not depend on anticipation.

When he had put the room straight and swept up the hearth with a newspaper—Betty, he knew, hated an untidy grate—he stood on the hearthrug and added further redundancies to express his realisation of perfect satisfaction. They had the whole of life before them, he reflected gleefully, full of boundless possibilities of enjoyment, and yet there was no need for impatient longings after some ideal of future achievement that might never be fulfilled. He was content. He wanted nothing more than life with Betty in this delightful, inconvenient house. It was enough that she was there in the kitchen, cooking the fish that he had brought from Newquay. He might go in and see her at any moment, if he chose. . . . The bliss of it was almost too great to be borne. . . .

Millie laid the supper. He had expected Betty to do that, but he was not impatient. She must come soon, and he could revel in that knowledge, almost wishing that this period of happy waiting could be prolonged.

And when she came, apologising for the time she had taken, and explaining the deficiencies of his household requisites, she was still in the same brisk, practical mood she had shown since she had first set foot in the house. He had not yet dared a single caress, nor any approach to one—unless the holding of her arms on the Porth Hill could be counted—and this preoccupation with housewifely duties seemed to hold him at arm's length. Nevertheless, as he passed round the table to the place that had been laid for him, he let his hand rest for a moment on her shoulder. And if she had given him the least sign of encouragement, he was ready then to postpone the eating of his supper indefinitely; but she appeared to be unconscious that he had even touched her.

"We mustn't be too long," she said, when he had sat down. "Millie has promised to stay, just this once, to help me wash up afterwards."

"Need you do that to-night?" he asked. He wanted now to be alone with her, to tell her all that he had endured, and all the relief of her coming. He wanted to be near her again—

not the physical nearness of an embrace, but the sense that he and she understood one another, that they were at the outset of a wonderful life together, with common aims, sharing the delight of each other's love and understanding.

"Oh, we're going to do things properly now," replied Betty. "I can guess the awful hole-and-corner way you've been living by yourself. I may be over-civilised, as you said, but you've been simply a savage!"

"It wasn't worth while, you see, to be anything else," Jacob said. "Of course, now you've come . . ."

"It'll take me a week to get things straight," she put in quickly, and launched out into an account of all the things she proposed to do in the house, indicating his share in the preparations for the new régime by saying that he would certainly have to get more cooking utensils from Mrs. Olver, or, failing that, go over to Newquay and buy some.

"Oh, we'll buy 'em!" Jacob said. "They'll be ours then, and I don't suppose old Mrs. Olver has got anything to spare."

Betty thought they might try Mrs. Olver first. "We aren't so rich as all that," she added.

The meal was soon finished. When Jacob protested that she had hardly eaten anything, she excused herself first by saying that she had had lunch in the train, and then by the statement that she never could eat directly after a long journey. And she cut short his reply by getting up and packing the black tin tray that had been left on a chair by the door.

"Look here, can't I help?" asked Jacob.

"You'd only hinder," Betty said. "You stop here and smoke. I shan't be long."

But it seemed to Jacob that she was never coming back. Surely it did not usually take all that time to wash up a few supper things! His mind was no longer content to contemplate his present bliss; he was a little anxious as to Betty's attitude towards himself. She had been so terribly matter-of-fact since she had arrived, and he wanted the relief of that long talk which was to inaugurate their perfect understand-

ing, the beginning of their new life. Without question, his own life had begun to-day.

He got up once or twice and went to the door. He could hear the sound of voices in the kitchen, and wondered what Betty and Millie had found to talk about. He was glad, nevertheless, that Betty had not treated Millie as an ordinary servant.

It was ten o'clock when he heard the back-door slam, and knew that Millie had gone at last. He sat quite still and waited. He felt unaccountably nervous now that the moment had come. There was no wind to-night, and everything was extraordinarily still. He could hear his heart beating.

The sound of the kitchen-door startled him. She was coming. He heard her footsteps in the passage—slow, reluctant footsteps, they sounded to him. She hesitated at the door, and then he heard her run upstairs.

The sudden disappointment stirred a feeling of resentment in him. He could not bear to sit still another instant, and began to pace restlessly up and down the room. He remembered how, many months ago, before there had been any understanding between him and Betty, he had paced the Montague Place drawing-room waiting for her. But this was a thousand times more agonising. What could she be doing upstairs? What should he do if she did not come down? He looked at the repulsively uneven surface of the sofa, and wondered if he could manage to sleep on it.

He went to the door again and listened. He could hear no sound in all that quiet house, and when desperately he called "Betty!" his voice sounded discordantly loud and harsh.

She did not answer him at once, but when he had summoned up courage to intrude a second time on that forbidding silence, he heard her say: "All right, I'm coming." She must have spoken the words in her ordinary voice, but every syllable was audible, and he knew that she must have heard him when he had first called to her. He felt chilled and miserable. He went over to the fire and knelt on the hearth-rug. What could be the matter? Had he offended her in any way? . . .

When he heard her coming slowly, quietly, down the stairs, he waited until he knew that she must be standing in the doorway before he got up and turned towards her. He looked at her keenly, wondering if she had been crying, but he could see no mark of tears on her face—only that same look of resolute aloofness she had worn during the drive from Newquay.

It came to him that he had been a fool, that he should at least have had another bed made up. Perhaps it was not too late now. At the last resort there was that lumpy sofa.

He took out his cigarette-case and lighted a cigarette. "I expect you're frightfully tired," he said, with an effort to be casual. "And, I say, I can perfectly well sleep on the sofa to-night."

4.

She came into the room and sat down in one of the two uncomfortable armchairs by the fireplace.

"I think I should like a cigarette, too," she said, and held out her hand towards him with a gesture that might have been conciliatory.

Jacob preferred to regard it as a part of her request for a cigarette, and gave her his case and a box of matches. If he had, in a sense, compelled her to come down here, she must understand that he had no intention of presuming on her confidence in him. She must realise that she was still a perfectly free agent, that if she preferred to live apart from him in this house, he would not urge her to any relation she was not prepared to enter upon. He was content to wait, if only she would stay.

He sat down on the opposite side of the fireplace and tried to find delicate phrases to express his attitude. For quite five minutes they smoked in silence, and then Jacob said, somewhat with the feeling of continuing an old conversation:

"I *do* want you to stay, but I want nothing else until you are—well, until you feel as I do about it."

She was leaning forward, staring into the fire, and she

turned her head and looked at him for an instant before she said:

"I don't mind. It can't make any difference now."

"Oh! but it can make all the difference," he returned.

"It does make all the difference to *me*." He waited for her to answer him, and then, as she made no sign, he went on:

"Why did you come, if you felt like this?"

"You frightened me," she said.

"Frightened you?"

She nodded. "I thought you were going to kill yourself."

"But I said I wouldn't, quite definitely, in my letter."

"I know. I hardly realised that at the time. It was that diary you sent me."

"Were you only frightened because you felt the responsibility rested with you, because you had promised?"

She shook her head impatiently.

"You did care what became of *me*?" he asked.

"Of course."

"But, then, why . . .?"

"Your letter," she said, "made me so sorry for you. You seemed so lonely and so deserted. I cried over it."

"Then you do *care*? For me?" he ventured.

She threw away the end of her cigarette and looked at him, wrinkling her forehead in a perplexed frown.

"All the way down in the train," she said, "I was wondering if I should be too late. It was silly, I know; but I thought of you as being weak and ill, and somehow helpless. I kept thinking of that all those hours, and it saved me from worrying about what I had done. It made me feel that I had to come. And then . . ."

She stopped, and he prompted her with a murmured "Yes?"

"Oh! you looked so brown, so strong and well, . . . and . . . and confident. I felt as if I had been taken in, that you had . . . can't you understand?"

He understood very well. He saw the case against himself with revolting clearness. And what evidence could he bring to refute the implied charge? Was it not to a certain

extent justified? He had worked himself up into a state of nerves, but that state must have been purely emotional. Since her telegram had come that morning he had been in the soundest of health and the best of spirits. There was nothing whatever the matter with him. Had there ever been anything more than a self-induced emotionalism?

"I wish you could have seen me the night before last," he faltered.

"Why? Were you ill then?"

"Not ill; not physically ill," he said, struggling to give a just account of his condition. "It was a state of mind," he continued; "but it is so difficult to explain. It seems to involve my whole life. I don't think I'm neurotic"—she smiled faintly at that—"but I've got some inherent weakness of mind. There come times when I can't *do* things—anything; when I can't fight against . . . life; when it's too much for me, and I just want to chuck it, or go right away somewhere, and begin again without all the handicap I've been piling up. I know I'm making myself out a pretty poor sort of creature, but I *can* do some things, and go on doing them—only I want encouragement, help, love—someone to understand me. And since my Aunt Hester died more than ten years ago—she was my mother, practically—I've never had anyone who could or would understand me. I suppose you think I'm awfully weak?" he interjected.

She smiled again, with a suggestion of grimness this time. "I haven't found you weak," she said quietly. "Go on."

"Well, when I met you," he said, "I began a new life. I'd never wanted anything before as much as I wanted your love. It was the most *real* thing that had ever come to me. The only real thing, I think. And that's why I could, in a way, fight for you. . . . But when I thought you weren't coming, I crumpled up—mentally. I was worse than I had ever been before. I hadn't even the initiative to go over to Mawgan and get my boots mended. I wore them right through the soles. I just *couldn't*. I can't explain it. And I didn't shave, and I ate all my meals from the larder shelf. Nothing ever got cooked unless Millie did it. I didn't care.

I felt that my life was over, that nothing mattered so long as I didn't have to make an effort."

"Didn't you try to fight it?" put in Betty.

"Oh, that's just the trouble," he explained. "It's the will to fight anything that goes. It's a sort of madness—at least, mental paralysis. I felt as if I hadn't got a soul. It was much worse than being physically ill, Betty—it was, really. I'm sorry that I don't show it in my face now. Of course, the brown's nothing. You can be dying, practically, and still look brown. But although, apparently, every sign of it's gone since I had your telegram, I *have been* dangerously ill. It was an illness of the soul, perhaps, but it was far more deadly than an illness of the body. Oh! can you understand?"

She did not answer him immediately. She was stooping towards the fire, her hands up to her face. "Wouldn't anyone else have done as well?" she asked at last in a low voice.

He guessed what was in her mind. He had been married, and he had told her also of his young love for Madeline. He had had two women, at least, in his life, and had parted from both of them. His need that he had tried to explain had not been satisfied by his earlier loves. It might be that he would tire again; that his desire was nothing more than a longing for a temporary stimulus; that any other decently suitable woman might have filled that need of his. And he knew that no explanation or protestations could possibly carry conviction.

"I can only say 'No,'" he said simply. "But if you feel like that, I am, as I said before, quite content that we should live apart. You know what I mean. There are four other bedrooms here. You needn't think that I should worry you or that I should blame you in any way. I shouldn't—really I shouldn't."

She made no attempt to answer that, so he went on. "I see how tremendously selfish that suggestion is. You would be just as much compromised as you are now, and I should have no right whatever to keep you. I have no right to ask you, of course. But I'm not standing on any rights. I must

keep you here—as a housekeeper, if you like; but I can't let you go. I'm not pleading, Betty. I'm stating a decision. I must have you near me. It just makes the difference between heaven and hell."

Betty leaned back in her chair and smiled—a tender smile now, the smile he had longed to see for three months. "Oh, you funny dear!" she said.

"Am I?" He got up and stood on the hearthrug. "Why?" he asked cheerfully.

"Because you are always so careful to leave me quite free to go my own way, and you always end by commanding me."

"I don't mean to."

"But you always do it, and you always will."

"Do you hate it?"

"Come here," she said, and pointed to the floor by her chair.

He went and knelt at her feet, and then gently put his arms round her.

"I sometimes think you *do* care for me a little," he said. "I'm hanged if I know why."

She put her hands on his shoulders, and softly pushed him away from her, so that she could see his face. "Because you're so weak and so strong," she said; and then she drew him close to her, and bent over him, "and because you are such a baby," she added, "and because you do love me so much. You do, don't you? . . ."

"Darling, why are you trembling?" she asked him a minute later.

He held her closer still. "I think you're trembling a little, too," he said.

"After all, it's only you and me," Betty murmured, as if she sought some ultimate justification.

XI.

GREAT ARGUMENT

1.

SHE insisted on his sitting down to work at nine o'clock the next morning.

"Oh! I shan't do any work to-day—of all days," he protested.

"Why not?" she asked.

"I want to be with you every minute," he said, "and to show you everything."

"I know where everything is now," Betty said. "Besides, Millie will be here presently."

He laughed happily. "I didn't mean that," he explained. "I meant the sea and the cliffs, Livelow and Mawgan Porth, and dozens of places. They've always been beautiful, but now . . ."

"That's for the afternoons," Betty decided. "In the morning we've got work, both of us. It'll take me days to get this house straight, and if *you* don't work, we shall have nothing to live on. Besides," she added, "we've plenty of time."

He sighed ecstatically. "The rest of our lives," he agreed, and stretched out his hands towards her.

She took them quietly, and as it were obediently. "But we must work," she said.

"Of course," he admitted; "but to-day . . ."

"We may just as well begin to-day," she said. "And I want that book of yours written. When are you going to read me what you have done all these months?"

"Do you want to hear it before it's finished?" he asked.

"Oh, I couldn't possibly wait till then," she said.

"Well, we might begin it after tea—if you feel like it, that is," he suggested.

"I'm longing to hear it," Betty said; and if her words were simple, her tone was convincing. "And now you must go and write some more of it," she added.

His face fell. "I wish to goodness I could," he said; "but if I work this morning, I simply must get on with my reviewing. I'm frightfully behind with it. It'll take me quite a week to get straight."

Her sense of the practical did not extend as yet to the detail of his work.

"Must you?" she asked, answering his first statement. "Does it matter?"

"I must, absolutely," he said. "It matters tremendously." Already he was resigned to the facing of a task that a few days before had seemed overwhelmingly impossible.

She was still holding his hands, and she swung them to and fro energetically as she answered:

"Then, my dear, go and begin at once, this very moment. You shall have the room all to yourself. I won't interrupt you."

"But I want to be interrupted," he protested—"once every half-hour at least."

"Well, you won't be," she said; and she dropped his hands, and began to push him gently out of the kitchen. They had agreed that it was better to have breakfast there.

Jacob allowed himself to be urged towards the sitting-room, but he insisted that he must be allowed to light the fire before he settled down.

When he returned from the outhouse with an armful of sticks, he found Betty in an apron on her knees at the grate.

"I don't like your doing that," he said on a note of remonstrance.

"Rubbish!" replied Betty. "Someone must do it."

"Well, why shouldn't I?" he asked.

"You've got your own work," she said; "and I must find something to occupy me."

2.

The significance of that last speech of hers did not then engage his attention. He was conscious of ability this morning. The pile of books that awaited him was no longer a cause for dismay. He knew that he could deal with them, could understand and criticise them. His mind was alert, was even eager for material to work upon.

He went over to the table in the window, on which he had stacked the books when he had tidied up the room, and glanced through the titles. Three or four he had read, and he decided to review those at once. If he were to work now, he must have material that would absorb his energy; if he attempted to read, his mind would begin to construct, not criticisms, but theories of its own.

He brought his books, paper, ink, and pens to the central table, which was moderately steady, sat down, and wrote the title, publisher, and price of the most important volume at the head of a sheet of foolscap, glanced through the notes he had made, and prepared to write his review. He knew precisely what he wanted to say; his only difficulty was the opening sentence.

He tried over half a dozen in his mind, and began one or two on paper; but he was particularly fastidious this morning, and the precise attitude he wanted to express would not take shape in a phrase. He found that he could not quite focus his thoughts on that opening; they had such wonderful, exciting material to occupy them. He lit a cigarette, and allowed himself for a moment to dwell on the ecstasy of that morning's awakening. . . .

He had waked early and had lain very still, while his mind had sung enchanted songs of thankfulness. He was no longer alone. She was there beside him—would be always there with him in future. An almost unrealisable bliss had filled him at the thought that his loneliness was ended as only Betty had the power to end it. Without her he must for ever remain alone. . . .

The joy in his knowledge of her near presence was not to be

borne sitting down, and he got up and began to pace the room. He could hear her moving about in the kitchen, and once or twice he went to the door and listened to that most reassuring sound. Presently he heard Millie arrive, and found that it was ten o'clock.

"It's absurd to try and work to-day," he thought, and then wondered what Betty would say when he had to confess that he had done nothing all the morning. He returned to the table and stared at the repulsive blankness of his foolscap. "I can't work," he murmured; and again came the reflection that, although he might cheat his own mentor, he could not deceive Betty. She would want to know what he had done—perhaps ask him to read his reviews to her. And it was not only to-day that this would happen, it would be the same every day. He had his happiness, but he was no longer free. He could not procrastinate any more; he had undertaken a great responsibility, and he must fulfil it by the discipline of steady work. He could not afford to dream of miraculous fortune, however delightful the process, when, as now, his imagination was so vividly constructive; he must face the tedium of concentration, of steadily applied mental effort.

And he must begin at once.

He sat down, picked up the book he had chosen for his first effort, and then, glancing in the direction of the kitchen, he said in a low voice: "This isn't a game any more, Betty darling; it's toil, hard work, repugnant effort, undertaken for you. I've got to take life more seriously." He had intended to begin his notice with an epigram; instead of that he began with the name of the author, and followed it with a cliché. . . .

When Betty came in at one o'clock to tell him that lunch was ready in the kitchen, she found him flushed and triumphant.

"That isn't bad for one morning, is it?" he asked, and displayed half a dozen sheets of well-covered foolscap. "I've done three books—fairly decently, too, I think. At this rate, I shall soon be straight again."

"Splendid!" she said. "I do want you to get on with your book."

"Oh, Betty darling! it's all so easy now I've got you," he said. "I could write a hundred books."

She smiled at him—a little sadly, he thought.

3.

The afternoon walk was spoilt by a fine drizzle that blew in from the sea, coming in ragged clouds, that looked first like smoke, and then like mist, and wrapped them in a passing haze of drifting sleet, so that the air was suddenly alive with little hurrying drops of moisture that fled by them and hastened intently up the valley. The black bluff of Mawgan Porth loomed immense and melancholy over the half-veiled darkness of the calm sea.

"It isn't really rain," Jacob explained; "it's cloud, right down on the earth." He found a symbol in it. "*I am* in the clouds to-day, dear, in any case," he said. "Aren't you?"

He asked the question with some anxiety in his voice. She had been very quiet as they walked down to the beach. He had taken her first to the wall letter-box, at her request, and she had posted two or three letters; but as she had volunteered no information, he had not asked her any questions about them. He was wondering now if these letters had been a sort of farewell to her old life, and if she were regretting the inevitableness of her exile.

Betty looked up at the gloomy mass of the cliff-head, and shivered. "It's rather lonely," she said.

He drew her hand through his arm and pressed his shoulder against her. "It isn't," he returned defiantly. "We can never be lonely again while we've got each other."

She did not answer that; she stood frowning, staring out into the grey mist. "And it's so sad," she said, after a pause.

"Wait till you see it all in sunshine," replied Jacob. "I'll admit it is a bit gloomy this afternoon, but it's very beautiful; don't you think so—big and splendid and grand?"

"Oh yes," agreed Betty, without enthusiasm.

"It has its moods, you know," Jacob continued. "Real

expressions of its own, and not just the things one puts into it. This afternoon, for instance, I'm just as full of happiness as I can be, but the sea and the cliffs and the valley don't reflect my feeling."

"They do mine," murmured Betty, without thought.

"Oh, Betty darling!" He was checked and frightened. "Do you really mind so much about the silly little world outside?"

She shook her head.

"What, then?" he asked; and as she still made no answer, he began to plead with her. "Oh, tell me—you must tell me!" he argued. "You mustn't hide yourself from me. Is it my fault? At least tell me that. Are you disappointed in me? Is it that you don't care for me?"

"No, not that," she said; and before he could question her again she went on: "Leave me alone, dear. I'm all right. It hasn't anything to do with you, and I shall soon get over it. But let's go in now; I can't bear the depression of those awful cliffs, and the sea, and everything. Let's get back to a cheerful fire."

They hardly spoke as they made their way back up the long hill. Jacob was a little disappointed. He had wanted her so much to share his delight in the sombre beauty of Mawgan Porth. And something of her depression had been communicated to him. Surely she would not always feel like this about her coming?

And when they were back again in the house, and sitting over their tea in the front room before a bright and well-behaved fire, she tried to deceive him by a display of cheerfulness.

"Now you're going to read the book to me," she announced.

He went and knelt at her feet.

"I'll do anything in the world to make you happy," he said.

She put her hand on his hair and looked down at him. "I'm quite happy," she said.

"Quite?" he asked.

She nodded; and if he was hardly convinced, he thought it

better not to press her then for any further reassurances. "She'll be all right in a day or two," he persuaded himself. "It is a tremendous thing for her to have done, I suppose."

4.

The reading of his novel was a great success. He read steadily on until seven o'clock, with only one distraction caused by the arrival of Millie, and then he helped Betty to lay their supper, and to make cocoa, and boil eggs on the sitting-room fire. Betty gave him all the praise and encouragement he had sighed for. His novel had appealed to her. She had found the stuff of reality in it.

"It's all so true and so alive," she said, as they had supper. "I haven't read many novels—I never seem to have had time—but all those I have read were always full of things that never could have happened. Yours is like life."

"Well, it is life in a way, isn't it?" Jacob said. "I mean that, although I have mixed it all up, and John Tristram's adventures didn't actually happen to me like that, I have only written of the things I really know something about. There isn't much imagination in it all."

"It's wonderfully real," she said, and then asked: "Didn't those things happen to you?"

"Oh, in a way." Jacob had treated that first love-affair of his, and was not very anxious that Betty should believe his version to be a detailed record of fact. In some way the romance of it had faded in the telling. He had found it difficult to recover the early rapture of his admiration for Madeline, and Tristram's *liaison* appeared less defensible than his own had seemed at the time.

"In a way," he repeated. "Not quite like that, you know. I've put a part of my experience into a different setting."

"But Tristram is you," Betty said.

He denied that. "He's only a part of me," he explained. "The most consistent part, I think. If I had only had Tristram's qualities, I might have made a success of things."

"Well, he's awfully like you," Betty persisted.

"Is he? I suppose he is," Jacob said. "And yet I don't picture myself when I'm writing about him. I can see him quite clearly in my mind, and facially he isn't like me. He's more hatchet-faced than I am, and he has got straighter hair, and his nose is rather longer and more aquiline."

"Yours isn't aquiline at all," remarked Betty; "it's perfectly straight."

"Yes, you'd never think I had any Jew in me, would you?" he asked.

"I certainly shouldn't," she said.

"I suppose I take after my mother," he returned, "as I do in other things. Aunt Hester used to tell me that she was always putting off her work, and expecting a miracle to happen that would make it all right for her."

"But you're not like that," Betty said.

"I am," he told her. "That's why I've made such a mess of everything."

"Well, you aren't going to make a mess of this book," Betty assured him, and he was willing to believe her.

They went back to their reading when the supper had been cleared away, and Jacob read on until ten o'clock. By that time he was not more than half through his pile of manuscript.

"I can't go on any more; my voice is giving way," he remarked, as he put the book down; "but there's a heap left still."

"I wish there were twenty times as much," Betty said.

"Oh, I can't tell you what a difference it makes to me having you," Jacob broke out—"all that it means having your encouragement. And you do like it, darling; I know you do by the way you say it."

He was kneeling beside her again, and he laid his head on her shoulder. "This is my success," he said; "I don't want anything more than this."

All her heart went out to him at that moment. He had taken her away from herself, helped her to forget for a time the indefinable reproach and fear that had darkened her outlook for the past twenty-four hours. She was warm with the thought that he was worth any sacrifice she might make.

"I think you're a genius, dear," she said, putting her face down to his.

He denied it blissfully. . . .

"And we are going to be unspeakably happy down here, aren't we?" he asked presently. "I can do anything, write anything, beloved, if I have you, and you're happy."

She had no doubt at all that night.

5.

The next day was Sunday—a festival, as Jacob pointed out, differentiated only by the fact that if you wanted your post you must walk to Mawgan and fetch it for yourself.

Betty discovered no eagerness for letters, nor did she suggest that they should go to church. Jacob had wondered if she might show any inclination towards a more rigid piety as some sort of compensation for the disregard of a certain precept they had broken.

He said nothing to her before their mid-day dinner—he worked with great steadfastness all the morning—but as they were preparing to go out afterwards, he asked her if she would care to walk over to St. Eval for three o'clock evensong.

"Have you ever been?" she asked.

"No, of course not," he said; "but, then, I don't believe in the Christian dogma."

"I don't know that I do either," was Betty's astonishing answer; and then, as he was evidently about to express his delight in her unexpected admission, she cut him short by saying: "But I don't want to discuss it, please, dear, nor . . . nor anything . . . of that sort. I want to forget all about it, and if you really want to see me happy, you'll leave that subject alone. And I am happy to-day," she added.

He had a feeling that this attempt to suppress and bury her qualms—she must have them still; she had admitted that in what she had said—was unwise, was little likely to lead to any real peace of mind for her. But he had not the determination to face the trouble just then. She had said she was

happy, and she appeared to be; he would wait until her malady had manifested itself before he attempted to cure it. And his intuition might be quite false. It might, after all, be better for *her* to forget, if she could.

"Good!" he said happily. "We'll go and explore Watergate; it's more cheerful than Mawgan Porth."

They finished his book that evening.

"Oh, do get on with your old reviewing, and write some more," was the essence of Betty's criticism; and she began to ply him with questions as to the further development of John Tristram's career.

They talked until half-past eleven, and Jacob felt sure that his intuition had been at fault. In six months' time, he thought, we shall be able to discuss that question of conscience without a tremor; it's all too fresh now. . . .

He heard her hurry out to the front-door when the post arrived the next morning, and after a moment's interval she came into the sitting-room.

"Anything?" he asked.

"Two papers and a letter for you," she said, and put them down before him.

"Only proofs," he commented; "some stuff I sent in just before you came. Was there anything for you?"

"I didn't expect anything," she said, "except, perhaps, a letter from Freda."

"You wouldn't get that till to-morrow," Jacob said. "No post out from London till midnight, you know."

"You wouldn't get country letters, then, either?" she asked.

"I don't expect so," he said; "not letters written yesterday."

She sighed with a touch of impatience, and he got up and went over to her.

"What was that sigh for?" he said.

"Nothing," she told him. "Are you still reviewing? When are you going on with your book?"

"In a couple of days," he said. "I shall sit down to it with an easy mind when I've got this stuff off."

"Well, hurry up," she returned. "You can work after tea to-night; there's nothing more to read."

"And what will you do?"

"Oh, I'll find something to do," she assured him.

He wondered, when she had gone, whether she had enough to occupy her, and remembered the admission she had made on that first morning when she had been doing the hearth. What was there to distract her mind down here from brooding on that problem of hers? Was she, perhaps, engaged in a perpetual struggle to thrust it down out of her consciousness?

"I must find something else to read aloud," he thought; but after tea she insisted that he should go on with his work. He succeeded in doing a little while she was out of the room.

After supper he read two chapters of a new novel he had for review, and then she confessed that it did not interest her. Afterwards they talked for a time, but Jacob found that ordinary conversation was beset with pitfalls. The forbidden subjects were lurking behind the most improbable corners.

"I wish we could be open about these things," he said at last, when the topic of the Laurences had left him facing another blank wall.

"Not yet," pleaded Betty. "In a little while I will, perhaps."

And again he wondered if he ought to insist. He had a queer picture in his mind of all those inhibited thoughts being thrust down and growing malignantly under the surface. . . .

6.

Tuesday's post always brought him his weekly tale of books from the office, but he had sent in no list to the editor on the previous Saturday, and was divided between anxiety lest there should be no books at all and a fear that there might be too many. He jumped to his feet when he heard the postman knock, but Betty was before him. He heard her footsteps in the passage, and waited for her to come in, but she returned to the kitchen, stayed there a moment, and then ran upstairs.

He found two parcels of books on the kitchen table. His anxiety was relieved; there were too many. And although he sighed in anticipation of the new burden they would impose, he was pleased by this evidence that the editor had not forgotten him. Moreover, an investigation of the parcels revealed the fact that two of the volumes were of some importance, that reviews of them would be required by the day of publication a week hence, and that "space" could be given to them. Jacob was flattered. He felt that he was still in touch with the world of letters, and that his criticisms were of some account in that world. Meredith had said that since Gresswell had been editing the *Daily Post* the literary side of the paper had improved enormously.

The statement had intimidated Jacob at the time, had made him nervous and over-anxious; but this morning he felt equal to any demand that might be made on his critical powers. He wanted immediately to go and tell Betty.

He looked at his watch, and found that it was not yet twelve, and then deliberately sat down to finish the work he had been doing before the interruption. "Discipline," he said to himself curtly.

He disciplined himself so well that it was a quarter past one before he permitted himself to reflect that Betty was very long in coming.

He found the kitchen empty, and no sign of any preparation for a meal. 'Had she been upstairs since half-past eleven?' he wondered. He listened attentively, but could hear no sounds overhead. The doors of that house were ill-fitting, but the floors were solid enough.

He went back to the sitting-room, and stood irresolutely by the table. What could she have been doing all that time? It was so unlike her to neglect the housework. He was afraid to go upstairs.

When he went at last, he went noisily to warn her of his coming.

He found her standing by the window with her back to the room.

"Hal—lo!" he said, "do you know what the time is?"

"I'm afraid I'm rather late," she said, without turning her head. "I'll be down in a minute."

"Is anything the matter, dear?" he asked. He was still standing by the door. Something in her attitude told him that she wished to be left alone.

"No, nothing's the matter," she said. "You might put the potatoes on; they're all ready. I'm coming in a few minutes."

"All right; don't be long," he replied, with an assumption of cheerfulness as he went out.

She was worrying herself, he reflected, as he made up the kitchen fire with wood from the outhouse. They must have this out between them, talk everything over quietly and reasonably. It was absurd for her to nurse this scruple of conscience. The thing was done now, and they must face the consequences bravely. And there would not be any consequences. Who had a right to criticise them? Certainly no one here in Trevarrian. No one knew; and if they did know, they wouldn't care. He worked himself up into quite a fervour of conviction for the righteousness of their cause.

But when Betty came down she made no further reference to her neglect of duty, and he could not be quite certain whether or not she had been crying.

They were very quiet over their postponed dinner. Jacob was still revolving his defence, going back into history for precedents; and Betty evidently did not wish to talk. And afterwards she seemed quite composed and cheerful again, and he thought that, perhaps, she had faced the problem herself that morning and conquered her weakness. He decided that it would be better to say nothing more just then.

She received his news with regard to Mr. Gresswell's implied compliment on his reviewer's ability as a matter of course.

"It has bucked me up, rather, all the same," Jacob asserted, eager for her to share his elation.

"You are too modest about your work," Betty said, and added: "I suppose this means that you won't get on with your book this week?"

"I think I can put in a couple of days on it," Jacob said.

But even that promise seemed to give her no real pleasure.

She did not come into the sitting-room between tea and supper; and Jacob's attention was not very successfully concentrated on the reading of one of those two important books.

He was anxious about her. "If only she could be happy here," he thought again and again, "it would all be so absolutely splendid. I could work now."

She had said nothing about having received any letters that morning.

7.

In the night he woke with a feeling of uneasiness. Something had recalled him to consciousness, some sound that he had recognised in sleep, and had instantly forgotten on waking. He lay very still, staring into the darkness of the room, listening.

For a moment he heard nothing, and then he realised that Betty was whistling under her breath, a tiny, sibilant whistle that shaped itself into the ghost of a tune.

He did not speak at once, and, called out of a deep sleep, he was vaguely annoyed at being disturbed. That faint, whispered tune was curiously irritating.

"What is it, dear? Can't you sleep?" he asked gently. He had not moved nor made any sound since he woke, but it seemed to him that Betty must know he had been listening to her.

The ghostly whistle stopped instantly, almost disconcertingly, but she did not answer his question.

"What is it, Betty dear?" he asked again; and then, as she still made no reply, he raised himself on his elbow and tried to distinguish her face in the darkness. "Can't you sleep?" he repeated.

"It's nothing. I'm all right," she said in a low voice that shook a little, as if it were hardly under her control.

"Betty! You're not crying," he said.

"Do leave me alone. I'm quite all right," she returned, more steadily.

"But you're not!" he exclaimed. "Oh! we can't go on like this. I can't bear to think of you lying awake and miserable. Betty, do speak to me! Do tell me what's the matter."

He sat up and felt for the matches on the table by the bed. But when he had lighted the candle, he still could not see her face; her back was towards him, and her face was pressed into the pillow.

He put his hand on her shoulder and tried to draw her to him. She resisted him with a touch of petulance.

"Why can't you leave me alone?" she said. There could be no doubt now that she was crying.

How long had she been crying, he wondered? For how long had she lain trying to keep back her tears by repeating that distressing little whistle? Surely she had allowed him to gauge at last the depths of her misery. All the old doubts and fears had returned. He had foreseen many responsibilities, and had been willing to take them upon himself, but how could he deal with this ultimate unhappiness?

"You *must* confide in me," he said suddenly, continuing his own line of thought. "It's this suppression that is making you miserable. If we could share it all; if you would only talk to me about it. . . ."

She did not answer him, but he found speech a relief. "It's the end of everything," he went on. "If you have found out that you don't love me, you must tell me so. I won't threaten you. I'll go on living somehow, but I can't bear this. I simply can't bear it—the uncertainty of it . . . to be in heaven one minute, and then to find out that you have only been pretending to care."

"It isn't that! it isn't that!" she put in.

"Oh! then tell me what it is," he besought her.

She sat up in the bed beside him. She had recovered her self-control, and although her face was still wet with tears, her voice was steady again.

"Why can't you go to sleep and leave me alone?" she asked. "I shall be all right if you'll only give me a little time."

"You won't!" he returned obstinately. "You'll never be all right while you keep things to yourself like this."

"I didn't think you'd hear me," she said.

"I heard you in my sleep," he protested. "You can't keep things from me like that. I *feel* your unhappiness." He paused, trying to remember the quotation that had inevitably suggested itself as the climax of his expression of devotion. "'My heart would hear you and beat if I'd lain for a century dead,'" he concluded.

"Couldn't we both die together?" she said.

He was suddenly, terribly shaken. Not till then had he faced the reality of her trouble. That single expression of feeling revealed awful depths of anguish. She had spoken so quietly and earnestly. It was as if she had found words for a vital desire that she had long been hiding from him.

"Betty, you don't mean that!" he said harshly. He could not bear to lie still any longer, and he got out of bed and put on his dressing-gown. For a minute he walked up and down the room; then he came and sat by her on the bed.

She looked so young, so girlish with her hair hanging down in a great plait; and the expression of her face, however sad and determined, was also young, almost childish.

"Oh, my dear, you don't mean that!" he repeated.

She put out her arms to him, drew him to her, and leaned her head on his shoulder.

"I don't know, I don't know," she said. "It would be the end of everything."

"You want me to die too," he said. He had a faint hope that the thought of that might in some way break through this strange, inexplicable mood of hers.

"I couldn't leave you alone," she said.

He shuddered, and held her desperately. There was no need for the pitiful "No, no, no" he despairingly repeated to prove that he could never again face life without her.

They lost all restraint then. They were so utterly alone together, there in the stillness of the night, so separated from all humanity, so free from any need for the least reserve. They were like two little children who had wandered out into

the unknown and were faced with the dread of coming night. And they clung to each other as though only so could they find refuge from the terror that was so near them. . . .

8.

But in the morning all that outpouring and revelation, their natural and direct expression of emotion, wore an air of being something dramatic and overstrained. When they had put on those garments of everyday civilisation that ranged them with the rest of their kind they had put on also some invisible cloak of restraint that hid them from each other. They looked at one another shyly, as if they were aware of a secret that must for ever be hidden from the world. Betty, at least, had revealed a wish of which she was now ashamed.

And her constraint was greater than Jacob's. He had confessed what he regarded as the unmanly weakness of unrestrained tears, but in a sense he had been the victor. By his very weakness, he thought, he had convinced her that she could never leave him.

He made no reference to their night's emotion at breakfast, but when he was alone in the sitting-room, faced by his morning's work, he knew that no work was possible for him until he and she had come to a clearer understanding.

He found her upstairs making the bed.

"How long shall you be over that?" he asked.

She looked up as if he had threatened her. "Why? What do you want?" she said.

Her apparent timidity gave him courage. She had said that he always ended by commanding her, and he felt able to command her now.

"We must talk about all this," he said firmly; and the memory of his own tears stiffened him yet more in his resolution. "I can't possibly work until we've had it all out, and the sooner the better."

Betty sat down on the bed. "It can't do any good," she persisted feebly.

"I suppose your people have been writing to you?" Jacob ventured.

"Why do you think so?" Her defences, she knew, were becoming very weak.

"Not a difficult inference to draw," he returned. "Naturally they would. And I suppose from their point of view . . ."

She interrupted him. "It isn't that that matters," she said.

"What, then?"

"You wouldn't understand. You would only argue with me, as you have so often before, and you can't put yourself in my place."

"Oh, but that isn't true!" he broke out. "I can—I can so easily. But why should I? The thing's done now—done for all time. Let's face it. Why should I make myself wretched by deliberately trying to take your old point of view, and encouraging you to exaggerate all those scruples that you ought to face and—and get rid of? Why shouldn't you make a big effort and try to look at everything from the common-sense point of view? . . ."

He was going on, but she stopped him by getting up and opening her trunk. "I suppose you had better see those letters," she said, "and then, perhaps, you'll be able to understand."

"I'll try," he returned resolutely, quite undaunted as yet.

She lifted the tray of the box and thrust her arm down under a pile of clothes. "I began to pack yesterday morning," she remarked.

"Began to *pack*?" Jacob repeated in wonder. He was more than ever anxious now to explore all this drama that Betty had been playing unknown to him.

"I meant to go away," she said, and stood up, holding two envelopes in her hand. "I never meant to show you these," she went on. "But you'd better read them now. One is from my father to you, with just a note inside for me; and the other is from my Aunt Mary. Will you go downstairs and read them? I'll come to you in a few minutes."

She looked at him with a hard defiance, as if the mere touch

of those letters had evoked some feeling of enmity towards him, or it may have been that she challenged his criticism of those opinions that he was about to pass judgment upon.

"I suppose you think I'm being rather brutal," he said; "but I must be, for both our sakes."

"We can talk about that when you've read the letters," she returned.

"Will that make such a difference?" he asked.

"It may not make much difference to you," she said.

"To you, then?"

"Well, I hope you'll remember that my aunt is a very dear woman, and that I'm very, very fond of her," Betty said; and Jacob had a sight of the attitude she expected him to take. This logical firmness and resolution of his was already involving certain penalties.

"I will try to understand your position, dear," he said, with the first sign of relenting.

She softened instantly. "It's so different for me," she urged.

"I know it is," he returned. "But we must face it and talk it out together, mustn't we?"

"Perhaps it's better," she admitted. But as he was leaving the room she changed her mind in one particular, and called to him.

He turned and looked at her.

"Don't read father's letter," she said. "Give it back to me."

"I suppose he hasn't been very polite," Jacob suggested.

"Oh, well, what could you expect?" she asked. "Anyhow, I'd sooner you didn't read it."

"I'm going to read them all," Jacob said firmly. "You don't quite do me justice. You think I'm prejudiced—that I can only see one point of view; you think I shall be insulted and abusive and bigoted, don't you now?"

"It must be so difficult for you . . ." she began; but he interrupted her by saying:

"Oh, my dear little Betty, can't you remember that I was brought up in that atmosphere, that I was educated by a

parson, and that I know precisely what parsons think and write about people like myself ? Trust me, dear. Besides," he added, " we're going to understand one another to-day, and it's just as well that I should have my lesson as well as you. We've got to find some middle ground for agreement.

There was no sign of conviction in her expression, but she allowed him to go.

9.

That short exposition of Jacob's, the statement of his willingness to find some middle ground, saved him from the mistake he would inevitably have made if his mind had not been cleared by definite and, as he believed, illuminating speech. Nevertheless, he was glad that Betty was not in the room when he read her father's letter.

Mr. Gale had written in the heat of the moment, without tact or consideration, an exhortation that might have driven to defiance a more pliable man than Jacob.

" Sir," the letter began, " I have heard from my daughter that, absolutely incredible as it appears to me, she has allowed herself to be deceived into accompanying you to Cornwall. What compulsion you have put upon her I have no idea, but knowing as I do my daughter's great, if not too discriminating, gift of sympathy, I conclude that you must in some way have played upon her tenderer feelings. I infer from your name that you are not a Christian, but I trust that your sense of what is right and honourable is not so perverted but that you will be able to see that the only course now open to you is that of at once surrendering all claim to my daughter's affection, and permitting her to return home immediately upon receipt of this letter. If, however, you still persist in restraining her, if not against her will, most certainly against all the dictates of her conscience and her sense of what she owes to her family, I shall be compelled to take steps towards recalling her to a proper state of mind. I cannot but feel, however, that you will repent your outrage upon morals and all decency when you come to consider the dastardly aspect your conduct must wear in the eyes of all right-minded people."

He had subscribed himself, without any conventional formula, "Charles Owen Gale."

Never before had Jacob suffered such a feeling of furious impotence. For a few moments he was dominated by a passion to take the Rev. Charles Owen Gale by the throat and strangle him. That was the only method of revenging himself. No argument, no true presentation of facts, could ever touch the awful, complacent superiority of the man who had written that letter. Betty's father was as sure of his own righteousness as he was of his social position, and to him Betty's lover was a Jew and a cad.

Jacob struggled to compose himself. He opened the window and tried to cool his burning face by leaning out into the air, but the memory of a phrase in that letter brought him back into the room again. . . . "Your sense of what is right and honourable is not so perverted . . ." he read, and clenched his hands, and swore viciously under his breath. He was utterly exasperated by the knowledge that he had no power to vindicate himself; no weapon wherewith to pierce that dreadful Pharisaism.

But the scene upstairs was still vividly in his mind. He had been grossly insulted and misunderstood; he furiously desired revenge; but this man was Betty's father, and Jacob realised that he must control himself when Betty came down. He had promised to find a basis for compromise, and that was not to be discovered by violent recriminations and abuse.

He picked up the other letter and read it hurriedly; but Mrs. Lynneker's appeal to her niece conveyed no impression to him. His mind refused to occupy itself with anything but the composition of replies to Mr. Gale, that varied between somewhat abusive reflections on the bigotry and stupidity of country parsons and dignified, brilliantly phrased expositions of Jacob's attitude towards morals and decency, including a definition of the class labelled "right-minded people."

He was in the middle of a most impressive sentence when Betty opened the door.

She looked at him anxiously, as if she was afraid that he might be greatly distressed. "Have you read them?" she asked.

Jacob made a gallant effort to appear unconcerned. "Yes, I've read them," he said. "Come in and sit down. I want to talk to you quietly about everything."

"Of course, you're very angry," she said.

"I was," he prevaricated. "Just for a minute or two."

"And you've read Aunt Mary's letter as well?"

"Yes, I think so." He took it up and glanced at it. "I don't know that I quite understood it. I—I was rather upset by the other. I want to talk to you about that first."

"It isn't really of the least importance," she put in quickly. "It didn't have any effect whatever upon me. I knew he would write like that. He was frightfully angry, of course. You must make allowances for that. He doesn't know anything about you, you see, and probably didn't believe half the things I said in my letter—I don't think he could have read most of them. . . ."

"I must answer him," Jacob said.

"I shouldn't," Betty urged. "It won't do any good. It'll only . . ."

"I know it won't do any good," interrupted Jacob; "not to him or to you; but it'll do *me* good. I've got to recover a little of my self-esteem. One always thinks of oneself as privileged in some way, as the centre of everything. I've never seen myself from the point of view your father takes, and I can't bear it. It'll stick in my mind if I don't work it off somehow. I shall always remember that your father thinks of me as a little Jewish cad who has disgustingly seduced his daughter."

"Oh, darling, he doesn't! . . ." Betty began; but he would not listen to her.

"He does; of course he does. He has said it in so many words," he broke out, losing his self-control. "He has tried his best to insult me as badly as ever he can, and naturally he has been at pains to point out that I'm neither a gentleman nor a member of the Church of England. He puts them in

that order, I notice. Well, I know I'm neither, but I have some sense of decency all the same. . . ." He stopped abruptly and looked at Betty. "Is that how you see me?" he asked.

"Oh, darling, come here!" she said, and held out her arms to him.

He hesitated a moment, and then went to her.

"I think you're the dearest, silliest old thing in the world," she told him.

"But you must have been influenced by that letter. You must have wondered . . ." he suggested.

"Do you really believe that?" she asked tenderly.

He smiled, and then, growing serious again, he said: "Well, why were you so miserable last night, and why did you begin to pack yesterday morning, and why did you suggest that we should go and kill ourselves?"

"It was Aunt Mary who made me feel like that," she said; "and you haven't read her letter yet."

"Does *she* abuse me too?"

Betty shook her head. "Don't you think you'd like to read her letter now?" she asked. "That really *is* important."

10.

He could not, however, appreciate the undoubted importance of that letter until he had come many steps nearer to that middle ground he had so hopefully indicated. The urgencies of Mrs. Lynneker, when he came to read them a second time, appeared to him as the commonplace expressions of Evangelical piety, and they irritated him hardly less than the abuse of her brother. Jacob felt that he was being badgered—attacked by those forces against which he had been in revolt for so many years. He wanted to make some immense demonstration that would finally expose the futility and narrow-mindedness of these foolish beliefs in the immediate concern and watchfulness of a higher power; he wanted to convince Betty, as the immediate representative of all mankind, that such religion as this was the absurdest superstition,

a development of animism, of the terror and propitiatory rites of the savage.

He looked up at her with a frown, mentally seeking those graphic, illuminating phrases which should dispel the darkness of primitive fear from her mind.

"This seems to you important?" he asked.

They had passed through many moments that Jacob, at least, had definitely diagnosed as "critical," but this quiet opening of what was intended to be a calm, almost impersonal discussion, was not included by him in that category. Yet never had he been so near to losing Betty as then. He had displayed to her, not for the first time, but never before so definitely, an attitude that seemed to her little less than fanatic. That in itself was of small importance; but sympathy and understanding were so essential for her just then, that to be met by argument—she foresaw it instantly when he spoke—seemed to her to open out a gulf between them that could never be bridged.

She winced. "You don't understand it?" she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I've heard and read this kind of thing so often," he said.

She looked at him coldly, and stretched out her hand for the letter. "Give it to me," she said. "Of course, if you feel like that about it there's nothing more to be said."

"Oh, but there is!" he protested; "everything. This is just what we've come in here to talk about, to discuss. This piety is at the bottom of all your unhappiness. On Sunday you said you didn't believe in it any more, but you do, and we shall never be happy till you get all these absurd superstitions out of your mind."

"You *don't* understand," she repeated, and felt hopelessly that she could never make him understand.

They were within sight of separation then for the first time.

Jacob was biassed by the struggle through which he had come, by his old revolt against religion. He had examined it all after he had grown old enough to think for himself, and long after he had rejected many another teaching of his youth,

once regarded as infallible. And he was eager now to pass on the light to Betty. The whole thing was so plain to him that he was sure that if he could but find words he would make it equally plain to her.

"Oh, I *do* understand!" he said, petulantly. "I understand, for instance, that if you make the tenets of Christianity the touchstone for all moral conduct, you and I are doomed to burn in hell for eternity."

Betty shook her head wearily and sighed. "It isn't that," she said.

"Partly, isn't it?"

"I don't think so."

"That is what your aunt would say. That's the standpoint she argues from."

Betty opened the letter in debate and turned to the third page of it. She knew that there was something she might say that would put everything straight, but she could not express it. "Listen! Can't you understand *this*?" she said, and read:

"My dear, what I want you to do is to look into your own heart and ask yourself whether some still small voice is not earnestly telling you that you have done wrong."

Betty stopped there and looked up at him.

Jacob had passed that sentence as a *cliché*, dismissing it with a faint disdain for the mixed metaphor. And in other circumstances he would have ridiculed the sentiment and the manner of it, and have gone on to prove that that "still small voice" of conscience was merely an echo of early habit and education. He saw the whole shape of his argument quite clearly in his mind, a fascinating, demonstrable proposition; but with his eyes he saw Betty's distress. And suddenly his irritation and rigidity left him, taking all his logic and prepared oratory with them. He realised with a shock that from Betty's point of view she had sacrificed everything for him, and that he was unwilling, or unable, to meet gift with gift.

"Does your heart tell you that you have done wrong, darling?" he asked.

She responded at once to the change in his voice. "Sometimes," she said. "It has more than once; I've felt that it was more than I could bear."

He gently pushed her into a chair, and then sat at her feet and leaned his head against her knees. "And I've been such an unsympathetic beast!" he said. "But now, dear, you must tell me all about it."

She put out her hand and stroked his hair. "I don't know that I can put it into words," she told him. "You knew I was miserable; what else could it have been?"

"I thought, perhaps, that you were disappointed in me; that you had found out that you didn't care for me. You don't know how wonderful it is that you should. I can't always believe that it's possible."

She leaned over him. "What are we to do?" she asked.

"Can't we go on as we are?" he replied. "Is your conscience too much for you?"

"Almost. Sometimes," she said.

"And won't it ever get any better?"

"I don't know. How can I know?"

"Why doesn't my conscience tell me I'm doing wrong?" he asked.

She took that up with a touch of eagerness. "Doesn't it?" she said. "Haven't you ever once felt that it was—was wicked for us to be together; that you ought to go back again to try to live with—that other woman?"

"Never once!" he replied, with magnificent assurance. "And as to the other woman, she has definitely refused to have anything more to say to me."

"Why did she?" asked Betty, lured away from the point at issue.

"We hated one another, that's all," he explained. "And I should never have made advances in the first instance if it hadn't been for Barker—the parson, you know."

"You do try to do what you believe is right, don't you?" she pathetically asked.

"I think I really do," Jacob admitted.

"And you really think it's right for us to be together?"

“ Good Lord, yes !” he said emphatically ; and so came to his long-postponed dissertation on the relation of conscience to morals.

She listened quietly enough, but it was not his argument that affected her at that time. Later it was all woven into the fabric of her re-education, but as yet she had not learnt to quote him.

11.

Jacob had given in to her on all essentials. He had come over to consider her point of view, to admit that she had a conscience that would not be denied on logical grounds and that must be tenderly treated. But he was firm on one point. He must answer her father’s letter. She might write what she would to Mrs. Lynneker, and he would not criticise any admission that Betty might feel moved to make. But he must re-establish himself in his own self-esteem by making his declaration of independence to Mr. Gale. Jacob intended that answer of his to be a model, an essay in right-mindedness.

He set about it as soon as Betty had gone to cook their dinner.

If he had not had one gift of the novelist, he might have succeeded, but his too great ability for adaptation spoiled his essay most completely. In argument with Betty he was able to display at times a restful definiteness ; he could hold his own point of view, and work himself up into a satisfying condemnation of any other. But when he sat down to express himself on paper, his fastidious search for a definite and conclusive statement of his own position left him with the feeling that he was quite incompetent to convince the adversary he so clearly visualised.

He pictured his correspondent as a model of self-satisfied righteousness, and then attempted all too successfully to see things from his opponent’s point of view. He thought that this, the means of the novel, was the only one by which he could penetrate those defences, and after half an hour’s concentration, he was forced to admit that they were impenetrable by any argument of his.

His act of intuition revealed to him that his logic would inevitably appear as prejudiced to Mr. Gale as Mr. Gale's own diatribes appeared to Jacob; and once he had recognised that indisputable fact, he felt that it would be a waste of effort to enter upon a futile controversy in which he, as the more flexible of the two disputants, would probably be worsted. . . .

When Betty came in to tell him that dinner was ready she found him smiling happily.

"Have you written?" she asked, with a touch of anxiety.

"No," Jacob said gleefully; "but I've worked out a really fundamental point of psychology that will be very useful to me when I come to write novels."

"Well?" she encouraged him.

"I've discovered that the only use of argument is to confirm one's own point of view—at least, that is what it comes to," he said. "If you want to convince anyone, you must fill them up with their own theories until they are sick of them; and you must never, on any account, disagree with a person you mean to convert."

"So you are not going to write to father?"

"Waste of time," returned Jacob.

"I'm glad," Betty said. "You'd only irritate him."

"I suppose you knew that intuitively?" he asked.

"I knew it, I don't know how," she said.

"Well, I've learnt it for myself by thinking about it," replied Jacob; "and if it's a slower method, it's the one most useful to the potential novelist."

"Come along, dear, the dinner will be all cold," was Betty's only comment on his re-discovery.

XII.

ABOUT IT AND ABOUT

1.

THE great discussion had not been of the quality that Jacob had anticipated; it had been vague and capricious, failing, as such conversations always fail, to keep to the point at issue; but it had nevertheless opened the way for him to understand something of what Betty was suffering. When he read hesitation or depression in her face now, he could attribute those signs to some fresh stir of conscience; he was less perplexed by the fear that she had repented her sacrifice because she was disappointed in the object of it.

And that little piece of knowledge was of considerable service to him during the next two weeks, a period that was marked by the arrival of many letters from Betty's relations, none of them in the least degree congratulatory.

He had a solid ground now for his invasion of those thoughts which by force of long habit she would have kept to herself. At first each attack of his was vigorously defended, but he had learned the disposition of her forces, and nothing but patience was needed to break down her resistance.

"I shall be all right if you'll only let me alone," was her almost invariable evasion when he questioned her as to the cause of any new evidences of depression.

"But you *must* share your trouble with me," was his obvious reply. "I want all your confidence."

"It only upsets you and interferes with your work," she said on one typical occasion, ten days after her coming to Trevarrian.

"That's such a secondary thing," he retorted.

"Is it?" she asked, trying desperately to forget the letter she had received that morning. "And what are we going to live on if you don't work?"

It was a warm, still day, and they were sitting among the rocks at the end of Watergate Bay, retreating every few minutes before the threat of the incoming tide, a game in which Jacob found perpetual delight.

"Secondary for the moment," he replied. "And can't you see, dear, that it's worse for me when you will keep these things to yourself? It isn't as if I didn't know. I know directly I see you if you're worrying again."

"I'm not worrying," was Betty's evasion.

"Do you mean to tell me that you haven't had another beastly letter from one of your relations this morning?" he asked.

"It wasn't beastly," she said.

"Good Lord! are there many more of 'em?" he asked.

"No more that count."

"Who was this one from?"

"My sister Hilda."

"What did she say?"

"Hadn't we better move back a little?" asked Betty.

"We shall get wet in a minute."

"Yes, we'd better. There's quite a big swell this afternoon," he remarked, "although it's so still; I expect there's wind coming from the south-west. And then you'll know the joy of that sitting-room chimney."

"Oh, Betty, isn't it glorious here?" he went on, when they had settled themselves again some way farther up the rocks. "We shall never have quite such a perfect time again. Do be happy."

"I am happy," she said.

"You're not; but never mind. What did your sister say?"

"Nothing particular."

"Is it worth while to put me off like this every time?" he persisted. "I shall go on nagging until you tell me."

And even then the instinct to nurse her secrets was so strong that she could not tell him at once.

Hilda's letter was so unlike the others that Jacob could not, at first, understand why Betty should have been distressed by it. She had brought it with her, and he read it there on the rocks, and protested.

"But she says that it will make no difference to her feeling for you," he urged. "What more can she say?"

"Yes; and she says that of course it won't be easy for us to meet now, but we might manage it if I was in London and she came up," Betty quoted.

"Well?" commented Jacob.

"Do you think I would meet her in some hole-and-corner way, when her husband didn't know anything about it?" she asked.

"Do you know *him*?"

"Hardly; I think I met him once before the wedding."

"Well, what's he got to do with it if your sister still feels the same about you?"

"If she did; but she doesn't, or she wouldn't be ashamed to see me."

"You're so frightfully sensitive," Jacob said. "I don't see how you can make out that she is ashamed."

"It's there in her letter, in every word of it," Betty said bitterly. "Not so much in the things she says as in those she hasn't said. I know Hilda, you see, and you don't."

Jacob was only half-convinced, but he gave way on that point, making a mental note that his impudence in having attempted to describe a woman in his novel was nothing less than colossal.

"Do you mind very much?" he asked.

"Not the least," Betty said. "I'm sorry, of course; but I have seen very little of Hilda the last year or two, and I don't know that we were ever very great friends."

"And yet this letter makes you miserable?"

She did not answer him immediately, and he took her hand and held it. "Can't you explain, dear?" he insisted. He

felt so sure that it was necessary for her to confess her heart-searchings.

"It's so difficult," she hesitated. "You can't understand, and you'll argue with me. I shall get over it."

"I do understand," he said; "and I promise you faithfully that I won't argue this afternoon."

She turned her head and looked at him. "Well, can't you see that it isn't so much that I care tremendously for my people—I'm afraid I don't, in a way—but they *are* my people, and they've let me see pretty plainly what they think of me. Even Hilda's patronising and forgiving in a condescending sort of way. I know she doesn't mean to be, but she simply couldn't help it. They all think I'm wicked, disgraced for ever, and they make me feel that they must be right. It isn't as if I'd felt as you do about it to begin with. I *have* done it against my conscience, as Aunt Mary says; she understands me the best of all of them."

Jacob remembered that he had promised not to argue, and he knew no other way of combating Beechcombe opinion.

"Well, what's to be done about it, beloved?" he asked.

"There's nothing to be done," Betty said; and then she expressed a wish that had never before found speech between them. "Oh, I wish *she* would die," she said.

Jacob winced. "Would it relieve all your distress if we could spend ten minutes in a registrar's office?" he asked.

"It isn't that I really care about *that*," she tried to explain. "I know that that wouldn't make me virtuous again. . . ."

"What, then?"

"Well, you *have* got two wives, haven't you? And I've got no real claim on you."

"You've got ten million times more claim on me than the other one has," Jacob said, with a note of passion in his voice. "If ever there was a truly sacred vow of lifelong devotion made by two people, it was ours. We didn't make it before a government official, I know, and perhaps we haven't actually spoken it in words; but it's the most tremendous thing in my life, for all that."

He had put his arm round her, and she drew close to him as she said: "You wouldn't ever give me up, would you?"

"It's utterly unthinkable," Jacob replied solemnly.

And for that time, at least, she appeared comforted and almost content. They sat on until it was nearly dark and the sea had driven them back to the face of the cliff.

"I will be happy," Betty said, as they climbed the path on their way home.

"If you're happy, I've nothing left to wish for," was Jacob's fervent answer.

2.

The south-westerly gale that he had prophesied began to blow that same evening, at first in little, uncertain gusts from the west, and afterwards backing and increasing steadily in force.

They were still in the sitting-room at ten o'clock when the first intimation that the wind had got back towards the south was furnished by the celebrated chimney. The little column of smoke that had lifted so steadily for the past ten days suddenly gave a little dip, as if it had curtsied, and a thin wraith of vapour crept up under the mantelpiece.

"It's coming," remarked Jacob gloomily. That smoking chimney was so full of horrible associations for him that even now, in Betty's company, he could not shake off the feeling that there was some omen of dread in the threat of another spell of discomfort.

"I don't think much of that," Betty replied cheerfully.

"You wait," he said. "It hasn't begun yet, but it will. We probably shan't be able to use this room to-morrow."

He was a little vexed that she was not more apprehensive, and insisted at some length on the terrors that were in store for them.

"Well, what about the other room?" she asked, still undaunted.

"I've never had a fire there," he said. "The room's full of cases and things."

"They could be cleared out."

"I expect that chimney's just as bad," he remarked.

"Well, if this chimney does smoke very badly to-morrow, we can try the other room and see," Betty suggested.

"There's no need to get depressed about it yet," she added.

"I'm not the least depressed," Jacob assured her.

Nevertheless, he found it necessary to indicate further portents when they went upstairs.

"Come and listen," he said.

She stood beside him at the open window, and they leaned out together. In the intervals of the gale they could hear the long moaning of the sea half a mile away down the valley.

"It always booms like that just before and after a gale," Jacob said.

Betty, pressed close against him, did not reply.

"It's very wonderful, isn't it?" he asked, after a pause.

"We'll go down to Livelow after breakfast to-morrow if it isn't too fierce."

"It makes me feel rather miserable," Betty said, with a shiver.

"It makes me feel excited," Jacob replied. . . .

They both exulted in small triumphs the next morning.

There was no need to make any experiments with the sitting-room fire. Betty, much to her disgust, found the hearthrug covered with ashes, and the down-draught made itself felt plainly enough without the superfluous test that Jacob made with lighted paper.

He could not let the occasion pass without some expatiations on the amazing resources of that chimney, and on the miseries he had endured during the time that he always referred to as "the awful week."

Betty smiled and kissed him. "Let's try the other room," she said. She appeared perfectly happy that morning.

And in the smaller room on the other side of the passage she had her triumph, for the flue there proved to be a model for all Cornish chimneys.

"Well, why ever didn't you think of coming here when it blew?" she asked.

"I don't know. It didn't occur to me," Jacob confessed.

"I suppose I thought it would be rather a fag moving everything."

"That won't take long," returned Betty briskly. "Suppose you begin by taking those two cases out into the kitchen."

"Yes," Jacob said; but he made no attempt to move.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

"I was thinking how different my life would have been if I had met you ten years ago," he said.

"I should have been just seventeen," commented Betty.

He did not reply to that. "I could have done anything if I had had you," he went on.

She was still kneeling before the grate, but she got up then, put her hands on his shoulders, and gently shook him.

"You're going to do wonderful things now," she said.

"I can do anything with you to help me," he said. "You give me strength and courage."

"Even to go from one room to another," she put in.

"It is just those things that I fail in so helplessly," he said.

"I've no initiative; I always anticipate failure. I've no faith in myself. That's to say, I hadn't. I have everything in the world I want now."

"Are you going on with that book of yours this morning?" she asked.

"Darling dear, I'll do anything you tell me to do," he said.

But before he settled down to work in his new surroundings he spent several minutes in reflecting that he owed something of the brightness and confidence of his present mood to the vagaries of that sitting-room chimney. It had driven him to despair in the first place—a despair that had been an important factor in bringing Betty to him in Cornwall; and in the second place it had illustrated for him an aspect of his own weakness, and the glorious way in which those deficiencies of his would now be overcome.

Betty was his perfect complement, his strength and his feebleness so wonderfully dovetailed with hers.

"I am a lucky beggar," Jacob murmured, as he forced himself to concentrate on the subject-matter of his novel. There was no evasion possible to him now. Betty would insist upon

his reading his morning's work to her after lunch, even if he had only written a single page. He was almost too happy to write.

3.

The broad process of change that had begun to influence Betty—that had, indeed, been working in her unperceived for many months—was so gradual that neither she nor Jacob could appreciate any difference in her attitude from week to week.

He may have been right in believing that it was better for her to take him completely into her confidence, but the wonderful element of self-sacrifice that was an essential part of her continually counselled the disguise of any unhappiness she might be suffering. She felt that her confessions must react upon him, interfere with his work, and by degrees, perhaps, kill his love for her. Moreover, she had always had a tendency to take burdens upon herself with just so much recognition of the self-sacrifice involved as partly to justify her sisters' accusation that she often "made a martyr" of herself unnecessarily.

And in the old days at Beechcombe, and later in Montague Place, the tendency had been fostered by the attitude first of her father and sisters, and afterwards of Mrs. Parmenter. For in their different ways those four people had all taken advantage of Betty's willingness to save them from small troubles, while at the same time criticising her to that effect which Hilda and Violet had perhaps most adequately phrased.

Her father's "My dear, there was really no necessity for you to have bothered yourself," or Mrs. Parmenter's, "Surely, Elizabeth, one of the maids could have done that," contained the implication that once again Betty was making a martyr of herself. And she had accepted the aspersion without question of its truth, or any reflection on those who had cast it upon her. She was willing to admit that while she never gloated over her martyrdom afterwards, she was often conscious of her own magnanimity, when silently and unasked she took upon herself another's duties.

And it is possible that this very willingness of hers to take trouble on behalf of others might have developed into something very like a vice if it had been too long fostered by the selfishness of the people with whom she lived—if she had grown old in the management of a Bloomsbury boarding-house, for example. But Jacob saved her from that. If he was selfish, it was in another manner, and she could not doubt that he would have been at any pains to save her distress, anxiety, or even the fret of small household duties. They had had a dispute as to the lighting of the kitchen fire two mornings after she came to Trevarrian, but Jacob had insisted that that was his affair, and it was he who now first came down in the bleak December darkness to a cold kitchen. It was true that he liked her to make occasional reference to his heroism, but she knew that he never made a martyr of himself. What he did, he did for the joy of helping her.

Nevertheless, on various occasions, at increasingly larger intervals during the first months of her life with Jacob, Betty's trouble came to the surface, and was the subject of conversation between them. When he was anxious and perturbed, beseeching her with questions as to whether or not she was happy, she instinctively tried to hide her thoughts from him, to reassure him, and to wear an appearance of happiness generally so well simulated that it completely deceived him. But when he seemed inclined to take too much for granted, to assume that she must be content, and that her scruples were disappearing under the influence of his reasonable attack upon them, a spirit of contradiction sometimes moved her to revive his anxiety by displaying again those tremors of fear, doubt, and shame which still haunted her. And one such occasion which touched a climax they never afterwards reached was presented on the evening of Christmas Day, six weeks after she had come to Trevarrian.

4.

Jacob was particularly solicitous in the morning, moved rather by a sense that the festival would be an unusually dull one for her than by the consideration that the religious and

sentimental aspect of the anniversary might revive painful associations.

"Couldn't we do something to-day?" he asked at breakfast. "Have a celebration of some kind? It's our first Christmas Day together."

"What could we do here?" Betty said.

"Well, there's Newquay, you know," he suggested. "We might drive in and have dinner at an hotel, or something."

"And what about the chicken I got from Mrs. Olver?" she asked.

"That would keep till to-morrow."

"I don't want to go to Newquay. It would only be spending money for nothing at all," Betty said.

"I thought it might cheer you up a bit," he persisted.

"I'm not un-cheered," she returned, smiling.

"Aren't you? I thought you looked a little down this morning," he went on. "And it wouldn't cost much to go in to Newquay and have dinner there."

"I don't think I want to much," she said.

"Why not?" He put the question a little uneasily. He wondered if she were afraid that she might possibly meet someone she had known.

"Because I'd much sooner have dinner here with you," she said.

"Yes, but you do that every day . . ." he began.

"I believe you're getting tired of me," she interrupted, and so effectively changed the conversation.

And she succeeded so well in her assumption of happiness during the morning and afternoon, that Jacob believed himself justified in indulging in a fit of high spirits. He gave free vent to his enjoyment of life that day, rejoicing with a careless, boyish glee that was new to her.

"I didn't know you could be so silly," she said, when he entered into a portentous conversation with a stray goose they met in the lane going down to Livelow.

"Merely happy," he returned; "you haven't seen me really happy before, have you?"

She encouraged him in his light-heartedness then, but while she was alone in the kitchen after tea her own depression returned, and she made little effort to hide it as they ate their imitation of a Christmas dinner. Jacob, however, seemed for once to overlook the signs he usually diagnosed so quickly. He displayed a determined cheerfulness that slightly irritated her.

And when they were in the sitting-room after the dinner had been cleared away, she deliberately brought up the topic she had always avoided with such steady persistence.

"We neither of us had a letter of any kind this morning," she remarked suddenly.

"Why should we?" he returned. "*I don't want letters when I've got you.*"

She did not respond to that note of affection. "I think Hilda might have written," she said.

Jacob's heart fell. "You're not worrying about that, are you?" he asked. "Oh, don't, Betty darling! There's no reason on earth why you should. Let's be happy to-night."

She made an effort to respond to his appeal, but her reaction was too strong, and the tears came to her eyes even as she tried to smile.

"Oh, darling, what is it?" he implored. "Tell me what's the matter."

"Oh, it's nothing," she said; and then, inconsequently, "Sometimes I feel as if I can't go on."

He went over to her and put his arms round her. "Do you really mean that?" he asked.

"I felt to-day as if I must go away from here," she said.

That hurt him. He had been happier there than he had been in all his life, and to him the place was wonderful and beautiful as no other place could ever be. He had hoped, fondly, it seemed, that Betty would come to share his love for Trevarrian. "We can go somewhere else, if you like," he said coldly.

"No other place would be any better," she said. "I daren't go back to London."

He got up and began to pace the room.

"I thought you were getting over that feeling," he ventured.

"I don't believe I shall ever get over it," she replied.

"What *will* you do, then?"

"Nothing. There isn't anything to do."

"Do you want to go away from me?" He put the question without the least uncertainty in his own mind as to her answer, and he was shocked and suddenly afraid when she said drearily:

"I don't know."

He stopped in his walk and looked at her. She was leaning forward, her elbows on her knees, the picture of dejection. And the old doubt sprang up again in his mind. Was she tired of him? he wondered. It seemed so impossible that she could have no other motive than a mere uneasiness of conscience—after six weeks.

"What could you do if you went away?" he asked. "Would you go home? Would your people overlook this episode?"

"I couldn't go home again," Betty said positively. "That's all done with."

"Where could you go, then?"

"I could always take a place as cook, if it came to the worst."

He looked his despair. "You are just torturing yourself and me for nothing," he broke out. "What *is* it all about? Have I disappointed you?"

"Oh, it isn't *you*," she said. "You can't understand; you'll never understand how I feel about it."

"Still conscience?" he asked; and although she made no reply, he knew that he need look no farther for the reason of her present mood.

And argument, the only effective weapon, as it seemed, was denied to him, not only because she had begged him not to reason with her, but also because he had seen for himself how useless was logic against her sense of conviction. She believed him to be prejudiced, and his most earnest statement wore an air of sophistry. He knew how she stiffened herself

and set her mind against argument. But if they were ever to be happy together, he must devise some means to counter this depression of hers. If it were allowed to take hold of her, it would, in time, destroy them both. And no means presented itself to him but the appeal to common sense.

"Of course, you won't listen to me," he said, after a long interval spent in steering a meticulous course up and down the room.

She sighed, as if she were already weary of talking.

"Oh, Betty darling, won't you use your common sense in this as in other things?" he pleaded.

"I do try," she said.

That upset the attack he had finally determined to make. He realised that he had been about to use a useless bludgeon, that he had failed again in intuition, that he had not, indeed, understood her.

"But I can't get over the feeling that I'm doing wrong," she added, before he had time to applaud her effort.

"And you don't think I could help you?" he asked feebly.

She looked up at him. "I don't see how you can," she said—"how anybody can."

He felt checked and helpless before a return of the old inertia. The task was too much for him; he could not combat this opposition of hers. He gave up his pacing of the room, and sat down.

"Well, then, what's to be done?" he asked. "We can't go on like this. If you feel all the time that you're acting against your conscience, you mustn't stay. It doesn't matter about me."

"Would you let me go?" she said, with a new note in her voice that he wrongly attributed to relief at the prospect of release.

"I'm not going to keep you here to make you miserable," he returned. "If you find that you can never be happy with me, the sooner we separate the better for both of us." He spoke without bitterness or resentment. It seemed to him at that moment as if he only wanted the ease of certainty.

"And what would you do if I went?" she asked.

"Oh, what does it matter what I do?" he said, with the same unemotional detachment. "I don't see that we need consider me at all."

She got up quickly and came over to him. He was leaning forward, and she gently pushed him back into the chair and sat down on his knee.

"I will be good," she said softly.

He clutched her tightly as if she had nearly slipped from him. "But can you be happy?" he asked.

"It's only now and then I feel like this," she said. "I shall get over it. I know it's very silly, but sometimes I can't help it."

They both realised that she had made an immense admission. If she knew that her feeling of shame and remorse was "silly" and was determined to fight it, the worst was over.

And Jacob's thought, transcending for an instant the little limitations of time, urged him to say:

"How we shall both laugh at these crises of ours in five years' time."

"We shan't believe they ever happened," returned Betty.

5.

She was materially assisted in her efforts towards recovery by the single attitude adopted by her own people. They had now ceased to write to her, and none of them had attempted to deal directly with the slightly pathetic statement of feeling she had tentatively urged as an excuse for her amazing depravity. Aunt Mary had weakened her first appeal by repeating it; her father and Violet had each in their own way painted again the picture of the only form of virtue that could lead to spiritual and social salvation; Hilda had temporised on the side issue of how difficult it would be for her to meet Betty if she ever went back to town; and only the intimidating Northampton aunt had approached the real issue in a terrific argument that was summed up in an opening phrase to the effect that "this kind of thing *never* answered"

—the emphasis of the word twice underlined, demonstrating the certainty won by Mrs. Gale's inferentially unlimited experience.

Betty grew increasingly ready to dismiss her family with a shrug of her shoulders. All her relations had combined to condemn her without a trial. They were so magnificently certain of what God and Society would say, that they evidently felt it superfluous to make any inquiry as to the possible merits of a particular case. And this absolute refusal to condescend to argument, this unhesitating assumption that every question with regard to sexual morality had been finally settled in the Garden of Eden, precisely four thousand and four years before the birth of Christ, had given Betty far more cause for doubt than the whole volume of reason that Jacob was willing to pour out, if ever he were given the least encouragement. She felt that if the others had too little to say, he had too much; that his very eloquence gave his arguments the semblance of special pleading; but the application of her father's ready-made morality to a particular case set her wondering if any life could be guided by hard and fast rules. She saw so clearly that her own case was an exception, and her father's religion held no place for exceptions.

Moreover, she was more than a little disgusted by her sisters' lack of charity. Violet was acidly superior, and Hilda's concessions seemed to be due rather to an admission of personal weakness than to any willingness to allow that Betty might have been justified by peculiar circumstances. And Betty realised very clearly that, if the cases had been reversed, if Hilda, for example, had broken the laws of Beechcombe by a similar or even a far worse irregularity, she herself would have been full of sympathy and love for the offender—would, in fact, have considered the person rather than the offence. Was it the influence of religion, she wondered, or of individual character that made so much difference?

One day in January she put the question to Jacob.

He laughed, and asked her if she were not tempting him to display his forbidden powers of argument.

"I have been trying to argue it out for myself," Betty admitted.

"You will get farther that way than by listening to me," Jacob said eagerly. "That was what I always wanted you to do; I only wanted to start you . . ."

"In a certain direction," she put in.

"Well, not necessarily," he said thoughtfully. "The point is that I wanted you to examine the whole question for yourself, instead of taking everything you had been taught for granted. I knew that if once you began to think . . ."

"I should come over to your point of view?"

"Yes."

"You know you're just as certain you're right on one side as my father is on the other," Betty said.

He saw no way out of that except by submitting that he had looked at both sides and her father only at one.

"And you think if anyone looks at both sides . . ." Betty began.

"Honestly and conscientiously, without prejudice," he interpolated.

"Well, without prejudice as far as possible," Betty continued, "you think anyone who does that is sure to come over to your side?"

"Any reasonable person," he said, by way of qualification. "But there are heaps of people who can't get rid of prejudice and can't see things for themselves." He paused a moment, and then made a frontal attack by adding: "Well, *you* are coming round to my point of view, anyway."

"I've got to, if I'm to have any peace of mind," said Betty, pointing the essential he had overlooked.

He had to admit that the wish to believe was an aspect of prejudice that would not be denied.

Betty returned to her original question.

"Is it only religion that makes people so narrow-minded?" she asked.

"It must influence them that way, mustn't it?" replied Jacob, trying to be very fair and reasonable. "If you are absolutely certain where we come from and where we'll go to,

and who made the rules, and what the rules are, you must stick to it all. And of all the religions of the last two or three thousand years, Christianity has been the most clearly defined and the most ferocious. And you know the more definite a religion is, the better chance it has of surviving. The majority of people don't want to think things out for themselves, they aren't capable of doing it; and so they are thankful to have a set of rules to meet every case."

"Isn't it a good thing for most people that they should have a religion like that to help them?" Betty put in.

"Oh, very likely," Jacob replied; "the point is—is it true?"

"Many clever men and women have believed in it."

"Heaps and heaps of others, equally clever, haven't. But that's no argument."

"I don't think argument helps much," Betty said. "It's what one feels about things."

"Argument, reason, helped me," returned Jacob; "but I don't want to force it on you. But, Betty, darling, you are beginning to feel that I may be right, aren't you? That's the important thing so far as we are concerned."

"I think my relations have been so unfair," she said. "Not one of them, not even Aunt Mary, has troubled to find out the truth about us."

"But that's only a particular application of what I've just been saying," protested Jacob.

"Is it?" Betty said innocently. "Well, I can understand the application, you see."

And by whatever road she came to understanding, she was certainly less troubled than she had been. The "crises" grew less frequent and less severe. A certain stubbornness of character helped her. The lack of charity displayed by her family aroused her opposition. She was not so perverted as they seemed to believe, and by a constant defence of her own conduct, she was coming to an ever firmer conviction in her own and Jacob's rectitude of motive.

The first intrusion of the outside world into their Cornish solitudes served, happily, to confirm her confidence.

6.

Meredith's return to Porth had been repeatedly postponed. He had written two or three times to Jacob—placid, friendly letters, proving that he had not gone away with any feeling of enmity, after that evening's criticism. His book was to be published at the end of April, and he seemed to think that it had a fair chance of success.

Jacob had answered in the same vein, but he had said nothing of Betty's presence at Trevarrian; and, when he heard one Tuesday at the end of January that Meredith was coming back to Porth on the following Thursday, there was one brief moment of consternation.

"Need he know that I'm here?" Betty asked; and Jacob, losing his presence of mind, suggested that the fiction of a private marriage might be maintained.

"But he knows that you're married already," protested Betty.

"She might have died," Jacob hazarded.

Betty looked down at her ring and pursed her mouth. "It doesn't sound convincing," she said, and added: "Did he ever meet her?"

"Lola? Oh, Lord, no! I met him first, long after that," Jacob answered.

"Couldn't I go out when he comes?" was Betty's next suggestion.

But by that time Jacob had recovered his common sense. "Oh, my dear, no!" he said. "I don't know what I was thinking about, to suggest that we should tell him we were married. Meredith's a perfectly open-minded chap, if he does write rather old-fashioned books; he won't care twopence. We must be honest about it—of course we must."

Betty blushed vividly. "I'd much sooner not see him," she said.

"Darling, we must meet people sometimes," Jacob protested; "and how could we make a better beginning than this?"

"I don't see why we should ever meet people," Betty said;

and cancelled her statement immediately by adding: "Well, you must go over and see him first and tell him."

"And afterwards he can come over here?"

"We'll see what he says."

"Oh, *he'll* be all right," Jacob confidently pronounced.

Nevertheless, he was conscious both of nervousness and reluctance when he was actually sitting in Meredith's room on the following Friday morning. His story bore such a different aspect in those surroundings and in the presence of Meredith, with nearly all the tan blanchèd from his face, talking about London and literature and the people he had seen. It appeared that he had met several writers of contemporary fame, writers who had asked to be introduced to him. He told his successes modestly enough, but he was obviously flattered, and Jacob had a faint twinge of jealousy. His own book seemed suddenly trivial and worthless, himself a nonentity, and his beautiful love-story no more than a common intrigue.

He hesitated for more than an hour, listening to stories concerning the perquisites of literary success, before he dared to open his own confidence. But the inevitable pause came at last, and when he was asked, not for the first time, what he had been doing and how his own book was "going," he screwed himself up to his recital of adventure. He was so overwhelmingly anxious to display his story in its true colours and proportions.

He yawned nervously and got out of his chair. "Well, something tremendous has happened to me since you've been away," he began.

Meredith looked his surprise, and encouraged him by saying: "What a chap you are! Why have you kept it dark all this time, and let me go on gassing about myself?"

"I don't know," Jacob said. "I was very interested in all those people you've met. And besides, I find it rather difficult to tell you; I don't know why I should, but I do. I say, do you remember Mrs. Parmenter's boarding-house in Montague Place, and her partner, Miss Gale?"

"Well, rather, of course I do," replied Meredith, still

obviously puzzled. "I didn't often see Miss Gale, she was down in the kitchen most of the time; pretty, rather shy girl, wasn't she?"

Jacob grew hotter still. He was glad that Meredith already knew Betty, that saved much tedious explanation; but this description of her was so utterly inadequate and banal.

"Yes," he said deliberately. "Her father's got a living in Buckinghamshire, at a place called Beechcombe." He felt that it was quite essential that he should lay some stress upon Betty's social position; it seemed to give the whole affair a value of dignity and sincerity.

"Well?" Meredith prompted him, quite at a loss to foresee the climax.

"She and I fell in love with one another when I was at Montague Place," Jacob went on desperately. "Irrevocably, you know. It's the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me."

"Great Scott! and you never gave me the least hint before I went away," said Meredith. "What a secretive person you are!"

"Well, you know I'm married," put in Jacob.

"And now I suppose you're going to get a divorce?"

"I can't. It isn't possible. She won't and I can't," Jacob explained.

"What are you going to do, then?"

"She's here—Miss Gale, I mean," Jacob blurted out, "living with me at Trevarrian."

Meredith whistled.

"Now, don't for God's sake think that she's that sort of person!" Jacob said fiercely.

Meredith looked a trifle abashed. "What sort?" he asked.

"The sort you whistle at and look rather furtive about," Jacob said, fumbling for language. "I want you to come over and see us, but you must understand. She's terribly sensitive. She's had it all tremendously on her conscience. She only did it for my sake. I don't mean that she doesn't care for me—I think she does, incredible as it seems—but she realises all she has given up, and she . . . Oh, look here,

what I want you to understand is that unless you can be most awfully decent to her, I don't want you to come over. I shall tell her you've broken your leg, or your neck, or something. I suppose, as a matter of fact, that you don't 'disapprove,' do you?"

"Good heavens, no!" returned Meredith. "Why should I? How long has she been here?"

"Since the middle of November. You're very quiet about it."

"You haven't given me much chance yet," said Meredith, smiling. "Do you want me to congratulate you?"

"She must have spent *all* her time in the kitchen when you were at Montague Place, I should think," was Jacob's reply.

"I certainly didn't see much of her," Meredith said.

"Well, what are you going to do?" Jacob asked.

"I'll certainly come over if you'll let me."

"Come to dinner to-night?"

"All right. Thanks. I will."

"I must get back now," Jacob concluded. "She's been alone all the morning. She wouldn't see you until I'd found out how you felt about it. Good Lord, old chap! I don't envy you your success *now*."

As he walked back, he felt that he had closed on the right note; that he had at least partly expressed his attitude at the end. And, on reflection, he took himself to task for the one twinge of jealousy he had suffered when he had listened to all that talk of literary society. What could he ever want with literary society while he had Betty? And what an odd fish Meredith was! He practised the art of a romantic novelist, and yet he had not asked a single question as to the psychology of all the marvellous things that had been happening to Jacob. "He knows nothing about love or life," was Jacob's dismissal of Meredith, "and he isn't even willing to learn." And Meredith's novels were a success!

7.

Jacob was comfortably assured of the success of his mission, but his report of it was not particularly convincing to Betty.

"But what did *he* say?" she persisted, when Jacob had given a further exposition of his own part in the conversation.

"Well, he didn't *say* much. He took it all so much for granted," Jacob explained, trying vainly to remember any categorical expression of Meredith's opinion. "He didn't hold forth, you know; but I asked him once if he disapproved in any way, and he said he didn't quite definitely." On reflection, that appeared the only plain statement that Meredith had made.

Betty looked uneasy.

"Really it's all right, darling," Jacob assured her. "I've reported it very badly, but I'm absolutely sure that you needn't mind meeting him."

"It's all very well for you," was her retort.

"Well, I don't know what more you expected him to say," said Jacob. "What more could he say?"

"Didn't he seem surprised?" she asked.

"A little, at first," Jacob said. "Not at the fact, I take it, but at its being you and me."

"He wouldn't have expected *us* to do anything of that sort, you mean?"

"Oh, now you're going to twist it all round," Jacob expostulated. "He would probably have been far more surprised if I had told him that we were married. But, you see, he was naturally astonished to hear the news in a general way, if only because I'd never said a word to him about it before."

"Oh, I dare say you're right," Betty conceded, and then added: "But I wish he wasn't coming, all the same. Jimmy dear, *must* we see people? I would so much sooner not."

"Stay here always?" he suggested, frowning.

"I thought you liked this place so much."

"So I do; but . . ."

"You're getting a little tired of it—and of me?"

"Oh, my dear!" he said happily, and his reply to that second point was so assuringly, almost complacently, ready, that the question of meeting people or leaving Trevarrian was temporarily abandoned. He was thrilled by the suggestion that his devotion had become necessary to her. This response had been the ideal he had always cherished, and now that he found it for the first time, he recognised that it filled his need.

"We'll stay here for ever, if you like," was his final assurance. "I don't want to meet anyone else while I have you." At that moment he spoke with perfect conviction.

But Meredith opened out that topic again when he came, and left them both in doubt as to the ultimate wisdom of a lifelong sojourn in Cornwall.

His manner was irreproachable, and he gravely addressed Betty as "Mrs. Stahl," an assumption that Jacob afterwards explained to be perfectly justified. Nevertheless, she was very shy and silent during dinner, which was ceremonially "late" for the occasion. Afterwards, she was stirred to sound a trumpet that Jacob steadfastly refused to blow for himself.

Indeed, he had an exaggerated fit of modesty that evening, and persistently talked about Meredith's success as a novelist without any reference to his own ambitions.

Betty listened quietly at first, but when Meredith asked Jacob how his own book was getting on, and he instantly dismissed the subject, she returned to it by saying:

"It's getting on splendidly; I think it's very good."

"You're prejudiced," Jacob put in; but Meredith said:

"Oh, you've read it, of course. I thought it was very good too."

"I'm so anxious for him to hurry up and finish it," said Betty.

"Yes, why don't you?" Meredith asked.

Jacob smiled. "I've got so much reviewing to do," he said. "It takes me a lot of time, and it's all we have to live on. And when the book's done, it won't sell enough to pay the cost of the typing."

"My first book didn't," Meredith admitted.

"Please don't discourage him about it," Betty said quickly. "He's always saying that no publisher will take it when it is written."

"Oh, he'll get it taken easily enough," Meredith said. "There'll be no difficulty about *that*."

"But it won't sell afterwards?" Jacob suggested.

"Impossible to tell," Meredith replied. "No one ever knows."

"I've often heard that about plays," Jacob said, "but I didn't know that it applied to novels."

"Absolutely," Meredith assured him. "You can't account for the popularity of one novel and the utter failure of the next, in most cases. We were talking about that when I was up in town."

Betty and Jacob encouraged him to give them more "shop." To them it was all news and intensely interesting. They knew nothing of literary traffic by experience—Jacob had never entered that circle of writers and critics in which the business of literature is discussed with just as little respect as the business of any other profession. He had picked up a few clichés from Meredith, and the reviewing he had done during the past twelve months had stimulated him to analyse the material and methods of his trade. But the achievement of being an accepted novelist he still conceived romantically. He thought of that glory in the terms of his own experience. From the debased level of an architect's assistant or of a writer of advertisements, the altitude of the novelist had seemed to him hopelessly unattainable. In earlier days, when he had dreamed of making a living by writing, he had known that he only dreamed. And many times in the last year, he had been deliciously startled by the reflection that he was, indeed, a writer now himself; secretly he cherished the thought of meeting one of his old office acquaintances and modestly making the boast of his present occupation.

"It must be awfully interesting to meet all these people," Jacob said, commenting on a quotation from the *obiter dicta* of a well-known writer.

Meredith agreed; the fact of his recent recognition by a

larger public was still a source of considerable pleasure to him—with his last novel, the third he had published, he had attained a circulation of nearly three thousand copies; before that, he had achieved no more than the dry reward of a *succès d'estime*.

"It is interesting," he said, and then: "I'm thinking of taking rooms in town. I shall go up about the end of March and stay there until the middle of July. Next autumn I shall probably give up my cottage at Porth altogether."

"Sick of solitude?" asked Jacob.

"No, it isn't that," Meredith said; "but I think it's rather a mistake for me to be away from London so much just for the next year or two. It isn't that I want to be log-rolled; I haven't the right sort of influence for that, and I don't believe in it either; but I'm sure that it helps me, to meet people and so on."

"Oh yes, I dare say it does," Jacob agreed. He was suddenly conscious of his own isolation. He pictured an intellectual, competent society, willing now to receive Meredith into the inner circle of the cognoscenti. He had achieved something by native talent and hard work; he was on the high-road to success. His next book would probably sell five thousand copies, and he would be discussed as one of the young writers who counted. And, by contrast, Jacob's own book again appeared to him as little more than an impertinence. He wanted to tear it up and begin again; to write another novel on an improved model. He blushed at the thought of ever submitting John Tristram's story to a publisher; it was so formless, so unlike the accepted convention. He looked at Betty and saw that she too looked a little depressed.

But her next speech showed that her doubt was due to a cause other than his own.

"I think we ought to go back to London too," she said. "We were talking about it to-day."

Meredith expressed some polite agreement, but Jacob knew that it was to him her speech was addressed. He felt slightly embarrassed. He was willing now to stay on at

Trevarrian both for her sake and his own, but he could not, he thought, discuss the essential question before a third person.

Betty seemed to have no such hesitation. "I think it would be better for both of us," she went on. "He ought to know more people—people who write too, I mean. He hasn't enough confidence in himself. I'm certain his book is going to be a success, but he gets so down about it."

"You haven't said why it would be better for you," Jacob ventured. Her praise of his work made him uncomfortable in that company. It was altogether delightful that she should rate him so highly, but the very fact that she was biassed in his favour, however thrilling in itself, vitiated her criticism of him as a novelist.

"You can't imagine that *I* could want ever to see my friends again now, I suppose?" she said lightly, and turned to him with a smile.

"Oh yes, I can," said Jacob, wondering what friends, and not understanding the boast that her next sentence elaborated.

"Freda, for instance," she said, "and my married sister." She hesitated a moment, and then, as if to give value to her distinction and all that it implied, she added: "The other one, I suppose, would cut me if she met me."

Jacob accepted his cue. "She's getting rather bored with me," he said, turning to Meredith.

"Well, of course," Betty replied quickly. "But I'm sure it would be better for you too."

"Why not come up when I do, before Easter?" asked Meredith. "Where should you go? Back to the boarding-house, or into rooms?"

"It would have to be rooms, I think," Betty said. "There would be no place for him to work in a boarding-house."

"Oh, well, there's plenty of time to discuss that," said Jacob. He wanted to change the conversation. It was all a pretence, he thought, and it was better not to overdo it. They had vaunted that the irregularity of their ménage did not preclude a return to London and society, even to such creditable

society as that of Betty's married sister; over-emphasis would destroy the effect.

Meredith, however, appeared quite innocent of their intention to impress him. He may have been reckoning the success of his next novel.

8.

"Do you like him?" Jacob asked, when Meredith had gone.

"Yes," Betty said briefly, as if she had abruptly clipped some qualification, and added: "Is he really very clever?"

"I think so," Jacob replied, moved rather by an instinct to depreciate himself and his own work than by any peculiar admiration of his friend's capacity. "He writes awfully well," he explained; "fine English, you know, and descriptions—the sort of thing I could never do."

"You can do something better than that," Betty said.

He smiled his deprecation of her partiality.

"You can," she insisted. "You can write about real people."

"How do you know that Meredith can't do that too?" he asked.

"He isn't interested enough in them."

"You've seen him once, practically," urged Jacob.

"Quite enough. Aren't I right?" she persisted.

"Wonderfully, I think you are," he admitted.

"I know," Betty said, with an air of wisdom.

"By intuition?" asked Jacob.

"Perhaps not altogether. I was watching him to-night, and he wasn't interested in you and me, not a bit. He never asked any questions."

"Perhaps he thought that it was more tactful not to."

"I dare say he's very tactful," Betty said, in a tone that expressed no superlative admiration of the quality in this relation.

"Well, don't you think that was nice of him?" Jacob asked.

She pursed her mouth. "It wasn't the sort of tact that made me feel at home with him," she said. "I should have

felt far more comfortable and liked him better if he had taken a friendly interest in us, instead of putting on a polite manner and pretending to take everything so much for granted."

"I suppose he did his best," commented Jacob.

"I'm not running him down," returned Betty. "Only I don't think he's really as clever as you seem to think he is."

"I believe you know more about him after talking to him once than I do after three years," admitted Jacob. "But, you know, funnily enough, I was thinking just the same thing about him this morning—about his not being interested in us. I'm sure *we* should have been interested if it had been anyone else—before we made the great experiment ourselves, I mean."

"Of course we should," agreed Betty.

For a few moments Jacob reflected happily on the fact that he had always been interested in people. It had not occurred to him before that this fact was in some sense his credential as a novelist. The depression that he had suffered earlier in the evening had been charmed away by Betty's belief in him. He owed everything to her, he reflected, and then wondered if her expressed desire to return to London had been something more than a vaunt of independence, if she had meant to sacrifice herself and her own wishes still further for his sake.

"I say, you didn't mean that about going back to town, dear?" he said.

She looked quickly up at him, a look partly defensive, partly scrutinising. "You want to go, don't you?" she asked.

He hesitated, trying to analyse his own desires; he wanted to be perfectly truthful, and yet he wanted still more to do what was best for Betty. "I don't know that I do," he said. "I'm quite happy here."

She did not appreciate the honesty of his statement, and, reading into it something of that defensive attitude which was characteristic of her own habit: "You needn't mind telling me if you do want to go back," she said.

Jacob was still trying to regard the problem with a lofty

detachment. "Of course not," he said. "I shouldn't mind telling you anything. The point is, really, do *you* want to go?"

"I should like to see Freda again," was all Betty found to say.

"Well, why not ask her down here for a week?"

"She couldn't come. She has to look after the boarding-house."

"Couldn't old Parmenter manage by herself for once?"

"She isn't well enough."

"Betty, do you *want* to go back to town?" Jacob asked.

"I don't know. Yes. Sometimes I think I do," she said.

They were both eager to hide their own wishes, fearing lest they should not fully accord with the wishes of the other. Each of them was ready to make a sacrifice, if necessary, and they fenced in order to expose the other's secret desire.

"I thought you didn't want to meet people yet."

"I'm getting over that. I didn't mind meeting Mr. Meredith. I thought I should, but I didn't."

"I don't believe you want to go; you think it would be good for me."

"I'm sure it would."

"I'm not; and, anyway, that's not the point. You may be certain it wouldn't be good for me if you were miserable up there."

"I shouldn't be."

"How do you know?"

"Why should I be miserable?"

"There's no reason on earth why you should, but . . ."

"I've got over that."

"I think you're *getting* over it," Jacob admitted. "I wonder if you would be happier in town with more things to distract you?"

In her heart she dreaded the return still, but she thought now that she had read his desire. "I expect I should be happier in some ways," she said, but could find no other illustration of the "ways" than a repetition of her former wish to see Freda.

Jacob signified his approval of that friendship. "Freda will be so sensible about the whole affair," he said.

But Betty shrank a little from that statement of her difficulties. She had no wish to be comforted by good sense. "Oh yes!" she said carelessly, "Freda will be all on your side."

Jacob noticed the difference in her tone, but made no comment on it. By way of making everything quite clear, he said :

"You do understand, don't you, that I don't care a hang about going back; in fact, for many reasons I should prefer to stay down here. I do want to do what's best for you, dear. You believe that, don't you?"

"Well, I want to go back, so that's settled," she replied bravely.

Jacob smiled. "Of course, we needn't settle it to-night," he said. He was still doubtful as to what she really wanted to do.

9.

Indeed, it seemed to Jacob that the project ultimately took shape of itself, that it was forced upon them almost without their knowledge. Certainly they never weighed the reasons for and against the plan, or calculated any balance of benefit. The thing gradually settled first into a probability, and then into a certainty. They discussed the means, the questions of where and how they were going to live, long before they had decided that the end was inevitable. But when Meredith asked Jacob one day if he had made up his mind to return to town, he replied that he had as a matter of course, and never stopped to wonder just when and how he had come to regard the arrangement as settled.

By the end of February they were taking steps to find rooms in Bloomsbury, a task in which Freda had promised to collaborate. Betty wanted to be independent of landladies and attendance. "Two furnished rooms and a landing or something, with a gas-stove that I could cook on," were the requirements that she had indicated to Freda, with the stipulation that the rent must not be more than eighteen shillings a week.

Jacob was divided between his joy in a Cornish spring and the increasing longing he felt for some undefined excitement that he anticipated in the return to London. He had been away from it now for seven months, and although he could find no rational explanation for his desire, he was conscious that London was calling to him in some way. Nevertheless, he was unaware of the strength of his longing until the possibility of fulfilling it was nearly snatched away from him by the last "crisis" that was ever seriously to raise his doubts of Betty's happiness.

That crisis was brought about by Freda's report of a possible "upper-part" for them in a house in Great Ormond Street. Jacob saw the finger of fate in that choice. He had had rooms in Great Ormond Street before his first marriage, and the very name gave him a sense of security.

"I don't see why that shouldn't do," he said eagerly, when Betty had read the letter that contained Freda's report.

"We can't afford twenty-two shillings a week," Betty replied, with no echo of enthusiasm in her voice.

"I don't believe we shall get anything at all decent for less," urged Jacob; "and it's only four shillings more than we thought."

"Do you like Great Ormond Street?" asked Betty, leaving him in no doubt as to her own feeling towards it.

"Yes, I do," he said. "It's quiet, for one thing. You know I lived there for years when I was in an office."

"Yes, I think you told me," Betty said.

"Don't *you* like it?" he asked.

"Not much," she said.

Jacob looked perplexed. "It's all very well," he explained, after a short hesitation, "but you say the rent's too much, and you don't like the street; but if you want to live in Woburn Place, or somewhere like that, we should have to pay more than double that price."

"I know I'm very silly," Betty said quietly, and went quickly out of the room.

Jacob stared at the closed door in blank surprise. His first wife had constantly found fault with him, and had bred

in him the habit of examining his own past conduct and speech in order to discover the secret offence—commonly some trivial thing—which had provoked the outburst. He reverted to that habit now, wondering what he had done or said to offend Betty. He could not bear to feel that there should be any misunderstanding between them; he was willing to give up anything rather than risk that, but he was quite unable to realise how he had upset her. Surely she did not think that he would insist on their going to Great Ormond Street if for some reason, of which he was at present ignorant, she had any objection against going there.

He anxiously weighed the problem for a few minutes, and then got up and followed Betty into the kitchen.

She was standing at the table, peeling potatoes. She looked up at him for an instant when he came in, but gave him no encouragement to speak.

"Betty, we won't go to Great Ormond Street if you don't want to," he said, in a note of expostulation that was both plaintive and apologetic.

"I don't mind," said Betty, very intent on her potatoes.

"But *I* do," he said. "I mind very much. I would a thousand times sooner stay here than go to any place you didn't like."

Betty dropped the last potato into the saucepan and gave it a little shake. "We can't stay on here indefinitely," she said.

"We can," he returned. "Not in this house, perhaps—they want too much for it in the summer—but there's that little cottage at Tregarrian—we could take that."

He was perfectly conscious that he was not making a serious suggestion; he was merely leading up to the original proposal by what he deemed a harmless introduction. He was prepared for her instant dismissal of the Tregarrian cottage, and was startled when she said:

"Do you think you would like that?"

She was still staring into the saucepan, giving the water in it a gentle swirl, and apparently absorbed in watching the effect of that operation. And suddenly the alternative of

staying on indefinitely in Cornwall was presented to Jacob as a serious possibility. Two months before he would have welcomed the idea; but now, as the prospect of leaving Cornwall faded, London seemed not only a desirable, but even the one endurable place for them to live in. He visualised its streets and squares and parks, shining with the movement of human life; he saw them all lit with the romance and mystery that had beautified them when he had first adventured into that unknown magical city. The very name of it seemed calling to him. To leave London for ever—London, the centre of the world—was to acknowledge defeat.

"Do you think you would like that?" Betty had said.

"I shall like whatever you like," he replied magnificently.

"You weren't so anxious to go back a month ago," she said.

"I haven't said I'm anxious now," he returned.

"But you are," she persisted.

"I'm not," he said carelessly.

She had been scrutinising his face as she spoke, but she returned again now to rocking her potatoes.

"I don't mind Great Ormond Street," she said in a low voice.

"What have you got against it?" he asked, trying to be very reasonable.

"Nothing," she said.

"But you must have had something; you distinctly said you didn't like it."

"Did I? I didn't mean those rooms particularly."

"Betty, don't you want to go back at all?"

"I don't know."

"I wish you'd leave your old potatoes alone and talk to me," he said. "You must see that I'm ready to do anything you want to do, if you'll only tell me what you *do* want."

"They've got to be boiled," returned Betty, ignoring his plea for a plain statement of her wishes.

Jacob moved aside for her to come to the range, but when she had put down the saucepan, he held out his arms to her. "Do tell me what you want to do, darling," he pleaded.

"I want to do what's best for you," she said; but she did not meet his proffered embrace.

"You can only do that by doing what will make you most happy," was his reply.

"You might not think so in six months' time if we stayed down here," Betty said.

"Oh, is that it?" he said, smiling, and went on: "But you *want* to stay here, then. You only go back to town to please me. Is it because you like this place, or is it because you're afraid to meet people?"

"I should like to go back if it weren't for that," she admitted at last.

"Are you still worrying?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Meaning 'yes,'" Jacob said.

"Not *worrying*," was her evasion.

Jacob sat down on the edge of the kitchen table. The objection to leaving Cornwall was presented now in another aspect; the whole question needed reconsideration.

"You know, dear, it's no use quibbling about this," he said, after a short pause. "If you really want to stay here, I'll stay with joy. But if you want in your heart to go back to town, and simply funk it because you're afraid of meeting someone you know, well, I think we ought to go back. You'll have to get over that sooner or later, won't you?"

"I do try not to be silly, but I can't help it sometimes," was Betty's rather pathetic admission.

"If you admit that it's silly . . ." he began.

"There's no doubt that *you* want to go, anyway," she interrupted him.

"Must we put it on those grounds?" he asked; and Betty, while she wondered how he could be so blind, made no effort to enlighten him.

"We'll take the Great Ormond Street rooms," she said definitely.

"Not if you don't want to," he persisted as a final justification.

"I shall be all right when I'm there," she assured him.

And he honestly believed that it would be better for her to give way on that point.

But to Betty the thought of London was curiously perturbing. It was filled for her with all the associations of another life that she had left behind her when she came to Cornwall. Her dread was not only of meeting some chance acquaintance in the street, but also of herself. She felt that she would have to fight her trouble all over again in those familiar surroundings. Here, she had never been other than she was now; there, she would be continually confronted with the difference, not fully justified to herself as yet, in her mode of thought and of life. The London she saw in imagination sat in judgment upon her.

"If you're miserable there, we'll come back at once," Jacob said.

"Very well," she agreed, and then added suddenly: "Goodness, what a fool I am!"

Jacob looked startled. "Do you mean . . ." he began.

"I wish you wouldn't interrupt me when I'm cooking," Betty said sharply. "I've forgotten to put any salt in the potatoes, that's all. And how much work have you done this morning, I'd like to know?"

"Oh, I'm getting on," said Jacob, smiling.

10.

Jacob went down alone to Livelow in the evening of his last day in Cornwall. He had wanted Betty to come with him, but she was still so busy helping Millie to clean up the house that at last she had besought him to go without her.

"I can't see why you should take all this trouble about the house," he had said petulantly. "I don't suppose it was so marvellously clean when I came into it."

"I must leave it decent," Betty had replied, with a slight frown and a set of the lips, signifying, as he had now come to know, that her determination was unshakable.

He had left her putting clean newspapers on all the larder shelves.

So he went alone, harbouring a faint anxiety lest she should be dreading the next day's journey, and be trying to smother her depression in housework. But when he came to Livelow he lost all thought of doubt or fear.

The tide was high, and although the sea never left the face of the cliff at that point, deep water was needed to carry those great rollers unbroken to the shore; to bear them up as they were borne now, so great and so far apart that the receding hollow of the stupendous trough seemed as if it must finally fail and expose the hidden floor of rock.

Jacob caught a glimpse of it all as he made his way down the valley, and hurried eagerly, loth to lose one moment's contemplation of that glorious invading. And when he came to the vantage of that rock which gave him such full and near sight of the splendid turmoil, while lifting him just beyond range of those fierce jets of exploding spray, he held his breath for an instant, as if he would concentrate every ability of his body on the reception of this vast, wonderful impression. . . .

For a time he was stunned by the enormous force and depth of that processional, intrushing assault upon the rock face. He sat rigidly attentive, murmuring now and again a feeble expletive of astonishment when some still greater wave rolled towering to overleap the retreating swell of its predecessors, and break with enormous thunder that shook the stubborn basalt of the awful cliff.

But presently his thought began to emerge in an effortless, unconscious process—thought that seemed to have a greater intensity and reality than life itself.

He saw himself as he had sat on that same rock four years before, going back then, as now, to take up with an eager heart the burden of living. And he condescended with an effect of rapture to the contemplation of the change in his circumstance that those four years had wrought. Little enough it might seem to one who judged him unemotionally; but to himself the change was immense beyond computation. His potentiality had been changed. Always he had had the desire to express himself by writing—the material had been

there in his mind, even on occasion the words of its translation into language, but he had been too weak to persevere. The task was so long, the result so unsure. Sometimes he had almost pleased himself, but far more often he had judged his expression a failure, so inadequate was the rendering, so fine had seemed the conception in the warmly coloured light of his imagination.

Now new possibilities were open before him. He had done little, but he had reached out a hand to grasp some accomplishment, however slight. For more than a month his imagination had been excited by the thought of entering the literary life of London. It had presented itself to him romantically as an intriguing, delightful thing. Meredith's stories had given him material, and Jacob had pictured himself as being received into that circle which, because it was altogether strange to him, was ideally conceived. He looked forward with trembling excitement to the romance that must change to realism as he entered it. And the thought of it had stirred in him a great desire for London, and stirred him now to create in his mind a glorious future.

For it was no longer an impossible thing that he dreamed. Alone, urged by a desire that stimulated his mind and left him physically inert, he was incapable of achievement. But the coming of Betty had changed all that. She believed in him; she gave him courage and strength and clearness. She was the immediate object of all his ambitions. It was for her now that he wrote every word of his novel; and in interesting her, in making his daily effort to please her and win her admiration, he was creating little by little the thing that would, he hoped, presently be the means of his old ambition.

Yet his love for her was not wholly selfish. She had become necessary to him; he could not picture a future for himself in which she had no part, and his thought of that future was full of his own glorious attainment. But he would have given up his ambitions without hesitation, if the choice of renunciation had lain between them and her. Although he might wish splendidly to succeed, he had no wish to succeed alone. . . .

The sun was setting, and the roaring assault of the sea was

changing its note as the tide receded—the big rollers were breaking before they reached the cliff, and the immense impact had given place to a seething tumult of heaving foam.

11.

Jacob rose, suddenly conscious that he was chilled and stiff, and turned his back on the unending conflict of the waters. And then he saw Betty coming down the valley to join him, the last glow of sunset on her face.

As she came nearer he could see that she was anxiously looking for him, and he began to climb down from his eyrie and to shout her name against the shouting of the immense sea.

"I was afraid," she said, as she came up to him. "I didn't think you would be so long. I thought you might have fallen over the cliff."

"The sea has been so magnificent," he explained; but in his heart he thought that her care for him was a still more wonderful thing.

BOOK V
ACHIEVEMENT

XIII.

VARIOUS ENCOUNTERS

1.

THE three rooms in Great Ormond Street were *en suite*, and the farthest of them could only be entered from the bedroom. This ultimate apartment was evidently a comparatively recent addition to an old house; it was two steps down from the level of the rest of the floor, and the door into it was so squeezed into the corner that there had been no space for the architrave against the right-hand wall of the bedroom and the opposite wall in the smaller room, which was instantly called the "kitchen" by Betty. And it did, indeed, contain a small gas-stove, and a sink with a cold-water tap under the window.

Jacob thought it would do very well. He had been interested in the passage hall and staircase from the moment of his entrance—the former panelled in some wood that could not be distinguished under its covering of dull brown paint, and the latter a specimen worthy of being included in the Council's Survey of London—not even contemplated at that date—a staircase with solid square newels that ran up from floor to floor, with short, thickset little balusters, and broad, heavy handrails and strings.

"This house must have been built in the reign of James II. at latest," Jacob announced with enthusiasm; and when he looked out of one of the two tall windows in their sitting-room, and found that he could see the doorway of the Working Men's Club on the opposite side of the street, he had another moment of jubilation.

"I lived here all those years," he explained to Betty, "and never knew that place had any particular associations. I was on the other side then, lower down; you can't see the house from here. That club, you know, was started by the Christian Socialists—Charles Kingsley and Maurice, and all that lot. I was frightfully ignorant about everything in those days," he added reflectively.

Betty did not appear to be greatly interested in their associations with James II. and Charles Kingsley. She was looking at the furniture, examining the inevitable lace curtains, the antimacassars, the imitation saddle-bag suite, the meaningless ornaments that crowded the mantelpiece, the marble top of the sideboard, and even the twisty-legged little chess-table that hid the warped and split deficiencies of its inlaid squares under crimson woolly mats.

"She seems clean," she remarked at last, in the middle of a brief exposition of the Christian-Socialist movement.

Jacob stopped abruptly, flushed a little, and then laughed.

"You're like a cat in a strange house," he said. "What does it matter?"

Betty gave a little shiver. "I couldn't live in dirty rooms," she said.

"Oh no, of course not," returned Jacob mechanically, and went on more briskly: "I think it's rather jolly, though, here, don't you? I like it."

"Yes—oh yes—so do I," Betty said, with determination. "Freda would have been sure to see that everything was clean. She's coming round after dinner."

"I know," assented Jacob. The first glow of his excitement had been quenched, but he was ready to forsake the view of the street to help Betty to unpack, and to enter into a consideration of how the rooms might be improved.

"I suppose she won't mind taking away some of those ornaments and pictures," he said hesitatingly, in response to a suggestion of Betty's.

"Can't help it if she does," replied Betty shortly.

"We shan't be dependent on her for anything," he reflected,

and added: "I suppose men are dreadful cowards in things like that."

"You're so helpless," was Betty's comment.

The "she" to whom they referred as a matter of course—known more definitely as Mrs. Coulson—was a dark woman of fifty or so, who wore spectacles, and was chiefly remarkable for a dark brown mole, the size of a florin, on her left cheek.

Betty had faced her in the first instance with a slight tremor of misgiving that she had not confessed to Jacob. But Mrs. Coulson, after a brief professional scrutiny, had evidenced a complete lack of any curiosity, even of interest. She had shown them the rooms, and answered Betty's questions with mechanical rapidity, and the only irrelevant remark that she had offered was made at the last moment, when she had paused, looked at Betty, and said with something of defiance: "I've got a small dressmaking business downstairs, if you want anything done."

"Rather a queer stick," had been Jacob's summary of Mrs. Coulson; but he found her slightly intimidating, and was anxious to postpone the delicate refusal of her ornaments and pictures until next morning.

Betty, now that she was satisfied—and in some mysterious way she had satisfied herself—that her respectability was accepted without the least shadow of suspicion, suffered no such qualms with regard to the removal of the offending objects of decoration.

"We may as well get it done at once," she said, and proceeded, despite the feeble protests of Jacob, to pile a very liberal collection of ornaments and pictures on the sitting-room table.

"She won't like those bally birds being taken down, I know—they take up so much room," was Jacob's final objection, when Betty, by way of crowning her work, removed five humming-birds, moulting under a large glass bell, from the mantelpiece.

"It's the worst of the lot," replied Betty.

"Oh, I know it is," agreed Jacob—but he looked very uneasy when she rang the bell.

There was an interval before Mrs. Coulson appeared, and she brought with her a small can of milk. She paused at the door, looked at the table, and then set the can down on the marble slab of the denuded sideboard.

"Oh, Mrs. Coulson, I wonder if you would mind . . ." Betty began, but the landlady, still apparently somewhat pressed for time, cut her short.

"I'll send my niece up with a tray," she said decisively, and then, as if she felt that some comment was needed, she added: "Some likes 'em, and some don't; I must find a place for 'em somewhere, I suppose." She did not wait to hear Jacob's polite and somewhat effusive expression of gratitude.

When she had gone, he repeated his opinion that she was a queer stick.

"I think she seems a nice woman," Betty said.

"And you are going to like it here, aren't you?" he said, with a sudden fervour.

"It certainly looks a little better now those awful things have gone," she replied.

"But it isn't so bad, is it?" he persisted. "You will be happy here."

"If you are," she said.

"I can be happy anywhere with you," he affirmed earnestly, and added: "We'll go back to Cornwall, if you like."

Betty smiled and went over to him. "You're quite, quite certain, aren't you, that you're not getting tired of me?" she asked.

"Oh, my dear!" was Jacob's contented response—and a minute later he laughed happily at the thought of what his life would have been without her.

2.

He thought Freda's manner towards himself a little formal, even chilling, when she came to see them that evening.

He remembered her as a very young woman who had momentarily attracted him, and might have attracted him still more definitely, had he not been living under Mr. Barker's

influence, and striving towards some remote ideal of selflessness that, in those surroundings, had appeared the perfect way of life.

He wanted now to discuss that experience with her. She had had strength to flout Barker's teaching, if she had for a time felt the strange influence of his personality—she with her defiant love-affair that had gradually given place to another quite as desperate, and, from Barker's point of view, quite as reprehensible. And Jacob, looking back and finding an atmosphere of romance and beauty in that sojourn in Camden Town, was eager to revive his associations with the place. He had made up his mind about the central figure of that episode in his life, and he anticipated pleasure in stating his opinions and in comparing them with those of one who had certainly seen more clearly than himself at the time. He and she had something in common, he thought, and there had been one morning in Camden Town when they had begun to understand one another. If it had not been for the intrusion of Philip Laurence, that understanding might have increased.

But Freda seemed to take no interest in that fascinating epic of Cecil Barker. It was some time before Jacob could decently introduce it, and when he found an opening at last, she eluded him with all the ease of a woman who can instantly divert the flow of her conversation into any channel she pleases. Jacob, directly confronted with a question he did not wish to discuss, would have been clumsy and embarrassed. Freda slid away from his inquiry as to whether she remembered "all that business in Acacia Avenue" with an ease that left him uncertain if her evasion were intentional. Not until he had deliberately broached the subject for the third time did he realise that she was equally deliberately avoiding it.

He was disappointed in her. He had not anticipated any unusual pleasure from her visit, but he had felt that she was an ally, that she would take up her old relationship with him, and help him to strengthen Betty in her young attitude towards the convention of marriage. Instead of that she had, he considered, treated him with a faint suspicion, and certainly with aloofness. It seemed that Betty was her older friend,

not himself, and he had the feeling that he was intruding upon their confidences. Indeed, before the evening was over, they adjourned to the bedroom on some excuse connected with Betty's wardrobe, which undoubtedly needed replenishing, and stayed there talking—he could hear their voices, although he could not distinguish their actual words—for nearly three-quarters of an hour.

He grew restless and impatient after a time, and he was on the point of calling to Betty when they returned to the sitting-room.

"You don't mean to say that you've been talking chiffons for a whole hour?" he asked, with a suggestion of petulance.

"Have we really been as long as that?" returned Betty, with a glance at the marble, gilt-faced clock she had permitted to remain on the mantelpiece—a clock that had decided for itself many years before that the ideal time for everything was twenty minutes past three.

"Pretty nearly," persisted Jacob—but he received no answer to his question. Betty, also, was gifted with a capacity for elusiveness on occasion.

But when Freda had gone he received a report of that long conversation in the bedroom.

"I'm afraid Mrs. Parmenter's dying," Betty said. "Freda says she's getting feebler every day; and she wants to see me."

"Does she?" ejaculated Jacob. He was surprised; he had pictured a certain vindictiveness towards Betty in Mrs. Parmenter's mind. "You'll go, I suppose?" he added.

"Of course," Betty said. "I feel in a way that I'm partly responsible for her."

"Not for her illness," Jacob put in.

"A little," Betty acknowledged. "It was a shock to her when I ran away like that. I was a coward. I was afraid if I told her I was going, that she would wire to father."

"Probably would have," commented Jacob.

Betty passed that by. "Anyway, she wants to see me," she said.

"Do you suppose she'll try to persuade you to leave me and turn to the path of righteousness?" Jacob asked bitterly.

"It wouldn't make any difference if she did."

"I hope not; but it might upset you again." Jacob paused a moment, and then said: "Betty, I'd sooner you didn't go."

"I must," she said, with that determined air that had never yet failed to overcome him.

"But why?" he asked plaintively.

"I've told you, I feel responsible for her."

"I suppose I couldn't come too?"

"I don't think she wants to see you."

"Probably not; but why don't you think so?"

"She asked Freda not to say anything before you. That was why we went into the other room."

Jacob hesitated, wondering how that arrangement had been planned under his eyes and in his hearing without his knowledge. His feeling that he had in a sense been intruding, had been a true one, he reflected. He took a turn up the room, paused by the chess-table, and attempted to flatten down one of the warped squares of its inlay.

"I don't like it," he said after a pause.

"I think you're being rather silly," remarked Betty.

"Perhaps I am," he returned; "but I don't want you to go there and have all your conscientious scruples revived again. It will only make you miserable—indirectly me, of course—and it can't do Mrs. Parmenter any good." He stopped himself on the point of calling her "old Parmenter," in his usual manner, influenced less by respect for her reported condition than by his wish to conciliate Betty.

"Darling, I must go," Betty said quietly. "I came to you when you wanted me," she added.

"Was that an act of utter self-sacrifice too?" he asked, resentfully.

She met his glance and smiled. All the means to convince him was in her mind, but she could not sift her thought into logical phrase. "Would you like me to refuse," she said, "when she's so ill, just because you're afraid that it will be a bother?"

"Does it come to that?" He defended himself vaguely, conscious that his case would not bear analysis.

"You're not afraid that I shall go off and leave you?" asked Betty.

"I don't want you to be worried—now, directly you've come back to London." He realised that he was routed, but he wanted to justify the resistance he had made.

"It would worry me much more if I didn't go," Betty replied.

Jacob went to her and kissed her. "I'm jealous of everyone," he said. "I don't want you to sacrifice yourself for anyone but me. I was jealous of Freda to-night. Do you like her much?"

"Yes, very much; don't you?"

"I don't know," Jacob confessed. "She has altered so. She looks ten years older than she did three years ago—and she is. Why do you suppose she snubbed me about Barker and Camden Town?"

"I didn't know she did. I didn't notice it."

"Refused to talk about it, anyway."

"She isn't very anxious to remember that part of her life, I think," Betty said. "She has never told me much about it."

"I wonder why," commented Jacob.

"Probably because it has unpleasant memories," Betty suggested. "You never like talking about your first wife."

Jacob winced. "I certainly don't," he said with emphasis.

"Well, why shouldn't Freda want to forget things too?"

"I'm rather an ass," Jacob admitted. . . .

Before they went to bed Betty suddenly put her arms round him and said: "We couldn't ever quarrel, could we?"

"It seems absolutely unthinkable, doesn't it?" he responded.

"Don't say it *seems*—say it *is*," she corrected him.

3.

Jacob awaited Betty's return next day with considerable uneasiness. She had gone out at eleven o'clock—the morning, it seemed, was Mrs. Parmenter's best time—and had set him down to work at the decently steady table in the sitting-room. But, although he had already lost two days that week—Thursday, in wandering about while Betty packed, and yesterday in the journey—he felt no inclination whatever to concentrate his attention on the reviews that ought to be finished by Sunday night.

By way of preparation he wrote to the manager of the *Daily Post*, and also to its editor, notifying them of his return to town, and sending to the latter the usual tentative indication of books he would like to review, chosen from the list of "Books Received" during the week. When the letters were written, Jacob went out and posted them. And as, when he had first gone to Cornwall, he had felt a strong sense of pleasure, even of exaltation, in his thought of Trevarrian's loneliness and isolation, so now he revelled in the recovered facilities of town life, in the thought of its shops and its services, its means of communication, and the vitality of its streets. He went up into Queen Square and studied the houses on its south side for a time, deciding that there was a good deal to be said for the beauty of English Renaissance architecture of that period.

As he walked back he began mentally to phrase an essay on the awful influences of the House of Hanover on English Art. Only the fact that he had allowed his reader's ticket to lapse, deterred him from visiting the British Museum in order to look up a few references to Horace Walpole and the indecencies of the Gothic revival.

When he was back again in their new rooms, he spent twenty-five minutes in searching for that lapsed ticket; and when he had found it at last in the inside pocket of an old jacket, he discovered that the time was nearly twelve o'clock, and that Betty might be home at any moment.

He sat down resolutely then to his review, without ever

pausing to address the recovered ticket to the Director of the Museum; but after he had written the title, publisher, and price of the book at the head of a sheet of foolscap, he was utterly floored to find an opening sentence.

His thoughts were diverted by the anticipation of Betty's return, and the more he reflected on the object of her visit to Montague Place, the uneasier he became. She was still so pliable—so apt, he imagined, to revert to her earlier modes of thought. And if the old associations of the boarding-house were added to the influence and possible preaching of Mrs. Parmenter, Betty might have a tremendous reaction; she might suddenly decide that she could not go on living with him, or, at the best, suffer another period of doubt and depression.

He pushed his notes and writing-paper from him with a spurt of anger. It came to him that he had been a fool to leave Cornwall. He knew that it was solely his own desires that had prevailed in making that decision to come to Great Ormond Street. He had been lusting for a change of scene, for the excitements of London, and, above all, he had been conscious of a feeling of expectation, of awaiting some success that would come to him when he came back to the centre of things.

But all these desires and hopes of his were inextricably involved with his love for Betty. He might lose something of his joy in life if it were necessary for them to live year in, year out, at Trevarrian; but he would lose infinitely more if she left him now—if he were once more alone, facing his wretched instabilities and inefficiencies. He realised it all so clearly and so truly. She was so much more than a mere support to him.

In his boyhood his Aunt Hester had given him the same kind of love, encouragement, and help. Without her he would still have been a helpless, physical cripple, because he had never had the strength of purpose to persist in the simple and yet tiringly monotonous exercises that had brought about his cure. And now Betty had come to him to help him in overcoming his spiritual malady. The analogy was absolute; indeed, it

was not an analogy so far as his own weakness was concerned, but a repetition of the same process. He wanted love and the inspiration of being loved. He wanted someone to believe in him, and constantly to revive his feeble faith in his own abilities. He would not be driven, and yet he needed and longed for the definite guiding power of some control.

And Betty had come, miraculously, to fulfil his every need. To lose her now would be to lose hope. He could not face the future alone. The very thought of it induced that old sense of inertia, of doubt in himself, of the futility of any effort he could force himself to make. But only the thought of his work, of long-sustained toil . . . he was ready to make a big effort at once to hold Betty to him. He was willing to suffer, to face her father and all her relations, to be stubborn and resourceful, to take any pains or meet any contempt, rather than permit her to leave him.

Nevertheless, when she came home, his first speech to her exhibited no sign of the strength of his resolves.

4.

"Well?" he said. "Has she persuaded you that you're very wicked?"

Betty frowned. "You aren't fair to her," she said. "You don't understand her in the least."

"Well, what did she say?" asked Jacob.

"Heaps of things. I must get the lunch now," said Betty. "It must be nearly one. I stayed talking to Freda."

"But it's all right?" he asked anxiously. "Tell me that, anyway. Surely lunch can wait. I'm in no hurry."

"You don't mean to say that you have been worrying about it—seriously, I mean?" she said.

"Worrying? Of course I have," replied Jacob. "I've been working myself up into a state of desperation. I couldn't write a line," he added, consciously relieved to find some plausible excuse for his failure to work.

Her face softened to a look of tenderness. "You weren't afraid that I shouldn't come back?" she said, smiling.

"Oh no! I knew you would come back. You wouldn't go off without telling me," Jacob said. "But I was afraid it might upset you. I had quite made up my mind to go back to Cornwall with you on Monday."

"Am I so precious?" she asked, and only rescued herself from his assurances by insisting that she must get the lunch, and that afterwards she would tell him all about her interview with Mrs. Parmenter.

But when she came to her story, Jacob did not find it satisfactory. He missed some essential, and guessed that she was withholding it to save him anxiety.

"Do you mean to say that was all?" he asked suspiciously, when she had given him a very brief account of Mrs. Parmenter's regrets that Betty had left Montague Place, and had emphasised the fact that the old lady had not brought any accusation on moral grounds.

"Practically," Betty thought.

Jacob shook his head. "You are trying to save me something," he said. "And I won't be saved. Betty, you must *not* keep these things from me. If she has been persuading you to leave me, you must tell me all about it."

"She didn't; I told you she didn't."

"Well, then, what was it?"

"The poor old dear is really very ill, Jimmy," Betty said. "She has fancies."

"About me?"

"Partly."

"Well, why not tell me?" he urged. "Surely you can trust me to make allowances. And, darling, you must see that if you don't tell me now, I shall certainly imagine the most horrible things."

Betty took his hand and held it across the corner of the table. "She has taken an extraordinary dislike to you," she said.

"In what way?"

"I don't know quite. Obviously she couldn't abuse you to me. But she kept asking me if I was quite sure that I hadn't made a mistake."

"What did you say?"

"I said I was absolutely sure."

"You are, dear, aren't you—absolutely sure?" put in Jacob. But when she had satisfied him on that score, he returned to his cross-examination.

"But why not tell me all this at once?" he asked.

"I thought it would make you so angry." Betty paused; she was still holding his hand, and she pressed it before she continued: "You see, dear, I think she must have written to father and Aunt Mary, and said things about you. I think that's one reason why they have been so horrid to us."

Jacob looked vicious.

"There, I knew I had better not tell you!" Betty exclaimed.

He controlled himself sufficiently to smile. "I'm not really angry with the old fool," he said bitterly. "Mischief-maker! Oh, the harm these people do in the name of Christianity!"

"Yes, I know," Betty admitted. "But you must make allowances for Mrs. Parmenter in this case, dear. She was terribly upset. . . ."

"And she had to vent her spite at losing a valuable partner."

"I'm very, very sorry for her," Betty said quietly.

Jacob sighed. "Yes, that's you," he said. "And I love you for it, you angel. You make excuses for everybody."

"No, I don't," she returned. "I'm bitter about Violet and Hilda. Hilda, at least, might have understood."

"I suppose the Parmenter woman poisoned their minds too," said Jacob. "I'm inclined to forgive *them*." He had a picture in his mind of Betty's sisters, and felt a little tenderness for them. He was sure that they must be sweet and lovable. "Did she describe me as a little Jew seducer, do you think?" he went on, anticipating a fervent denial.

"She had had such an awful experience herself, you see," Betty explained.

Jacob's face grew hot. "Oh, but I say!" he burst out, "you don't really think that she might have said that?"

"I don't know what she said. It must have been some-

thing pretty horrible." Betty looked at him anxiously. "She isn't quite right in her head, I'm sure she isn't," she added.

"Oh, Lord!" commented Jacob. "It makes me feel pretty beastly!" He got up from the table and shook himself, as if he would shake off the foulness of that aspersion. "Do I look like a Jew?" he asked, frowning.

"Not a bit, not the least bit in the world," she assured him.

He went over to the fly-blown mirror above the mantelpiece and studied himself anxiously. "I can't see it, anyway," he said. "Not that I really care," he went on. "The Jews are a jolly clever race. It's a pity in many ways that I haven't got more Jewish qualities. But, as a matter of fact, I'm only a quarter Jew, one grandparent in four, you know—my paternal grandmother. Stahl is a Christian name enough; and, unfortunately for me perhaps, I take after my mother, who was pure Celt—Irish. I hardly remember her, of course, but Aunt Hester has told me how she never could concentrate on anything; she was always expecting a miracle to put things right for her—and for me, too."

Betty got up and put her arms round his neck. "Oh! what does it matter, old silly?" she asked. "You're *you*, that's quite enough."

He surrendered himself to the delight of her love for a few minutes, but presently he returned to the essential topic by saying:

"Yes, dear, this is quite convincing to us; but somehow I don't like the idea that your father and all your other people should run away with the notion that I am a horrible little Jew seducer. Wasn't that what you said?"

"No, I didn't say it," replied Betty. "You said it. But I believe she must have said something of the sort—from father's letter, you remember."

"Well, do *you* like it?" he asked. "Do you like them to have that impression?"

"I don't care—in a way," she said.

"It hurts my vanity," Jacob announced, after a short deliberation. "I'm rather a snob, I think."

"I don't see how we can help it," urged Betty.

"Would you let me go and see them—your people?"

"At Beechcombe?" She was plainly startled, a little alarmed by the suggestion.

"Yes. Why not?"

"Would you really go down there and face them?"

"Like a bird," he said, full of confidence at that minute.

But she knew him better than that. "You'd hate it when the time came," she said.

"I might," he admitted honestly. "But I'd sooner do that than let them go on thinking all sorts of beastly things. It reflects on you," he added.

"They can think anything they like about *me*," Betty said, with an assumption of recklessness.

"Of course, what they *do* think is that you have been quixotic and sacrificed yourself as usual."

She did not deny that; she was trying to find some way out of the trouble without letting Jacob go down to Beechcombe. She doubted if he would produce a good effect there. He would so probably lose his temper with her father and denounce religious intolerance. Moreover, she wished to save Jacob the nervous strain of such an interview.

"I'll tell you what we'll do," she announced. "I'll try to get Aunt Mary to come and see us here. I believe she would; I believe I could make her come."

"Not a bad idea," Jacob agreed, more than a little relieved to be spared the ordeal of an unsupported attack upon Beechcombe. He would have gone; but he knew that when the time came he would have suffered agonies of trepidation. Nevertheless, he made one more boast. "All the same, I should like to meet your father," he said. It was true, but he would have liked to be suddenly confronted with his adversary, to be spared all the tremors and fears of anticipation.

"Well, perhaps you will later," Betty said hopefully. "But I will write to Aunt Mary now at once, and then I'm going to take you out for a 'bus ride, or a walk or something. It's a lovely day."

"We'll walk all the way down to Oxford Street," Jacob agreed joyfully, "and look into every shop as we go along."

"Very well," replied Betty, with all the enthusiasm she could muster. She would have preferred a neighbourhood less frequented by people who might recognise her. She wondered what she would do if they suddenly walked into the terrible Mrs. Gale. But, inspired by the thought of winning over Aunt Mary, Betty was full of hope that afternoon. She was undoubtedly getting over her silliness, she thought. Freda had laughed at her that morning. "It isn't as though you were hurting anyone else," Freda had said. "You didn't take him away from his wife. They weren't living together all those years ago when I first met him in Camden Town."

5.

They each received a letter on Monday morning. The first was to Betty a cause of mild jubilation. Aunt Mary had written from Beechcombe a short note to say that she would come up by the mid-day train, do a little shopping, and have tea with them in Great Ormond Street about five.

"She *is* a dear!" Betty said, with unusual emotion.

"She must be," agreed Jacob.

His own letter, however, gave them subject for considerable doubt and anxiety. The editor of the *Daily Post* had written, asking Jacob if he could conveniently call at the offices of the paper at four o'clock that day. No intimation was given of the reason for this request, and the formal manner of the letter presented no clue to the writer's intention.

"What should we do if he doesn't want you any more?" Betty said.

"Lord only knows!" returned Jacob. "It's all we've got to live on. I've got about ninety pounds in the bank, I think."

Betty reacted immediately when she saw how seriously Jacob regarded the possibility of losing his work on the *Daily Post*.

"But of course it isn't that," she said cheerfully. "The editor has always liked your reviews, hasn't he?"

"Apparently," replied Jacob gloomily. "But you never know. I got the job by the merest fluke. I might lose it again any day."

"If you did, you'd get another just as good, or better," she encouraged him.

But he would not permit himself to be consoled too easily.

"It's my own fault if I do lose it," he said. "I've slacked too much. And you know, dear, I've wasted a lot of time on that bally book."

"I wonder you dare to sit there and say that time was wasted," Betty said indignantly. "Your book is far more important than your old reviewing."

"But less profitable," remarked Jacob.

"Boo!" replied Betty.

"But, you darling, you're so prejudiced in my favour," he urged.

"We shall see," she said; and he allowed her to persuade him that his book was going to make their fortunes. She was so splendidly convinced that she infected him with the glamour of her own confidence.

That morning he worked with enthusiasm to finish his reviews, not from any dread of editorial reproof, but because he wanted them done in order that he might go on with his novel.

But when he was in the downstairs waiting-room of the *Daily Post* offices, the ideal of his book waned and took a less magnificent shape. He thought of all the writers who must have been in this place before him, and those who came to it now, every day—men who were so much better read than himself, who had had more experience of life, and who were gifted with such remarkable powers of literary expression. He grew hot at the thought of his own temerity in daring to match his work with theirs.

The influence of that urgent, authoritative place intimidated him. He had come to no criticism of it as yet. The *Daily Post* appeared to him as the organ of sincerity and truth, as presenting a high standard of achievement. He was proud to know that he was one of its reviewers, and that he had an

appointment with its editor, even though that appointment might have a sinister significance. He wondered if the commissionaire who had taken his name, or the boy who had conducted him to the waiting-room, knew that he was a contributor, and not some supplicant for an impossible favour. He would have liked to advertise the fact of his small importance with a becoming modesty, to say that he played a tiny part in the running of this great machine. Nevertheless, the place itself intimidated him. It was so great and so independent, so perfectly able to conduct its own affairs without any help of his. And about it all was that air of authority. He was there to receive a judgment, perhaps to be condemned in that he had failed to reach that high standard of achievement that the paper demanded.

Only on one previous occasion had he been in those offices or seen the editor, Mr. Gresswell. Then Jacob had been, indeed, a timid supplicant, and he had obtained his interview almost by accident. He had taken a step in the fifteen months that had intervened, he thought. He was no longer without any credentials; he had acquitted himself decently. He might have done better, but he had not been altogether a failure. And then his thoughts suddenly leaped back to the "awful week" that had preceded Betty's coming to Cornwall. He saw himself in the depths of despair and feebleness, a creature utterly unrelated to this newspaper office—a stark, primitive thing, repulsive, yet without any sort of fear such as now held him of the judgment of authority. But that miserable, desperate man in the house in Trevarrian had been himself; that mood of recklessness was as integral as his present mood of nervousness. Why did he react so strangely to his surroundings? Was there some deep, essential characteristic of the man, Jacob Stahl, or was he merely the creature of his circumstances? It had occurred to him before, and it seemed to him now that he had no individuality whatever. If he had, why could he not confront Mr. Gresswell with the wild man who had seen visions down at Mawgan Porth? He smiled at the thought that he might produce the effect of literary eccentricity. Better that, perhaps, than to seem a

nonentity. Genius was always eccentric, and he was timidly orthodox. Very plainly he was no genius. No one but Betty had ever supposed he was.

He looked at his watch, and found that it was half-past four, and he had promised to be back in Great Ormond Street by five o'clock to receive Mrs. Lynneker. The thought of that important interview—he certainly wanted to be present—diverted him from his introspection, and he spent another five minutes in growing impatience before the boy came to announce that the editor would see Mr. Stahl. He was a new boy, and as yet somewhat overwhelmed by the gravity of his functions.

Jacob instantly forgot his recent impatience, and followed the boy upstairs with the docility and dumb misery of a first offender.

Mr. Gresswell was standing by a table at one end of his impressively furnished room. He had a book in his hand, taken up, apparently, from a collection of fifty or more arranged on the table before him.

As Jacob entered, Gresswell looked up with a kindly smile, but he did not put down his book nor offer to shake hands.

"Are you settled in London permanently now?" he asked, without any form of greeting.

"I hope so," replied Jacob. He felt he could not give a more definite answer. At any moment he might have to take Betty back to Cornwall.

"I am going to make some more practical arrangement with regard to the reviewing," the editor said, passing over the uncertainty of Jacob's reply. "At present it is most unsatisfactory."

"Yes?" said Jacob, to fill the pause that followed. The opening had been equivocal, but he had an intuition that he was in some way to be promoted. "I hope my stuff . . ." he began.

"Certainly, certainly," Gresswell said, as if he were answering a specific question. "It isn't that at all. It's rather . . ."—he put up his disengaged hand and touched his glasses—

"it is chiefly a question of proportion. One reviewer sends me in a column about some comparatively unimportant book that happens to interest him, and other books get no attention."

"I see," agreed Jacob, and then, feeling that his own share in the conversation was not, so far, remarkable for any display of intelligence, he went on: "It—it depends, of course, to a certain extent on who is to judge the relative values." He meant to explain himself further, but Gresswell gave him no further opportunity.

"What I am proposing," he said, "is that we should have an informal meeting here every Monday, at, say, half-past three, yourself and one or two other of our reviewers, when we could go through the books together, and decide which should be done, and, to a certain extent, on the length of the notices. I have seen two or three of our more regular contributors, and they are quite willing." He paused and smiled his friendly smile again. "What do you feel about it?" he asked. "Would you be able to come?"

"Oh yes, I should like to," Jacob said. It was certainly very difficult to produce any effect of intelligence in a one-sided conversation like this; but as he was feverishly seeking for subtle comment on the scheme, an astonished-looking young man in spectacles came in with a sheet of very limp paper in his hand. He stared at Jacob and the editor, said "Oh!" in a thin, high voice, and then stood still with every appearance of bitter distress just inside the door.

Gresswell put down the book he was still holding and stretched out his hand, and the young man instantly came forward and proffered the damp sheet he carried.

"Mr. Grattan thought it ought to be recast, sir," he said in a rapid, half-expostulatory whine.

Gresswell took no notice of him whatever. He was holding up the wide sheet before him and reading it at an amazing speed. Jacob could see that the sheet was a single page of the *Daily Post*, printed apparently in very pale ink. He was excited and pleased, conscious of his new importance as a member of that Monday conclave, and also of a feeling that

this sight of a daily paper in the process of making was a valuable and interesting experience.

"Cut it out," remarked Gresswell shortly, returning the sheet to the anxious young man in spectacles, who said, "Yes, sir," and waited, evidently expecting further instructions.

The editor crossed the room to his desk, took up a long slip of paper and ran his eye rapidly down it.

"Hasn't the review of Hamilton's book been set up yet?" he asked, with a touch of impatience.

"It hasn't come in yet," squeaked the young man.

Jacob grew suddenly hot. "Er—did you mean those essays?" he put in nervously.

"Yes. Did you have them?" asked Gresswell.

"I've got the review here," returned Jacob, taking a foolscap envelope out of his pocket. "I—I thought, as I was coming down, I could bring my reviews instead of posting them. I hope . . ."

"Do you know how much it will make?" Gresswell said.

Jacob, by good luck, guessed the meaning of the question. "About a column, I think," he said. He knew by now that three sheets of foolscap in his own handwriting was almost exactly equivalent to a column of printed matter in the paper. "I gave it rather a long notice; I thought . . ."

Gresswell nodded curtly. He had taken the envelope from Jacob, and now, having glanced through the contents, he separated the review he wanted and gave it to the young man in spectacles. "I'll read the proof," he remarked. "There won't be time to send it to Mr. Stahl."

"I'm afraid I kept it rather long," apologised Jacob, when he and the editor were once more alone together. "I was rather upset last week coming up to town and so on."

Mr. Gresswell did not seem to hear him. "Then you'll come to the office next Monday at half-past three," he said. "And about this week, is there anything here you would care to take?"

It was past five when the elated Jacob got away at last. He hailed a hansom as soon as he emerged into Fleet Street. He had an armful of books—he had insisted that he could take

them with him as he was going straight back to his rooms—but neither that encumbrance nor the thought of Aunt Mary privately influencing Betty in Great Ormond Street, was the true cause of his extravagance. He felt that his good luck demanded recognition. He was a person of importance now—a member of a weekly meeting of reviewers, with a voice in deciding the fate of all authors, great and small, so far as their recognition by the *Daily Post* was concerned.

“I *have* had luck,” he reflected. “If it hadn’t been for Betty, I should never have done that review in time to take it down with me, and then there might have been the devil to pay! As it happened . . . And, after all, I had only had the book for a fortnight.”

6.

He found Aunt Mary sitting in the better of the two arm-chairs when he arrived. She had a full cup of tea in her hand, and in the saucer was balanced an untouched slice of bread and butter that had become partly soaked with spilt tea.

She looked up at Jacob as he came in; indeed, she stared at him with a steadiness that would have been rude, had it not been for some pathetic appeal in her expression. Her mouth drooped curiously at the corners; it was the mouth of a small child on the verge of tears.

“This is Aunt Mary, dear,” Betty said; and Jacob, with a sudden feeling of compassion for the little, pathetic old woman in the armchair, came quickly forward and offered her his hand.

“I’m so glad you were able to come,” he said. Whether because of his recent triumph, or because he realised in some way that this fragile little creature was already beaten, a subject for tenderness rather than opposition, he felt strangely compassionate towards her. He felt as if he were asplendidly successful son, eager for the love of a mother who had misjudged him, and had come to ask his forgiveness.

Mrs. Lynneker fumbled with her teacup, and gave him her delicate hand. She held him tightly for a moment, gazing up into his face as if she would read his most secret thought.

"Betty and I have been having a long talk," she said as she released him, and then she bent over her cup and began to eat her soaked bread and butter.

"Oh, Aunt Mary, let me take that away and give you some more," Betty said, bending forward.

"It's very nice, dear, thank you," returned Mrs. Lynneker, essaying to lift the sopped bread, pieces of which fell into her cup.

"Shall I take it?" asked Jacob, and he gently took the cup from her and passed it to Betty.

"I must make some more tea," Betty said, getting up.

"Not for me, dear, please," put in Mrs. Lynneker.

"I think *I* should like some," Jacob said, smiling. "I have been in a stuffy newspaper office for the last hour and a half, and I came straight back in a hansom. The editor kept me so long. Editors are such autocrats."

Betty, with the teapot in her hand, stood hesitating for a moment at the door into the bedroom, and then, as if reassured, she went out quickly and closed the door behind her.

Mrs. Lynneker looked up at Jacob then, with the same tremulous air of appeal, "Do you think you're doing right, my dear?" she said.

"Oh, I do—really I do!" replied Jacob gently.

"I can't see how . . ." Mrs. Lynneker began, and seemed to change her mind, for she went on: "You've nice, kind eyes, and you look sincere. I'm sure you're sincere."

"It's almost something more than sincerity in this case," Jacob said in a low voice, blushing faintly at her praise of him. "I mean that Betty is everything to me. I have been such a failure, and she's helping to make me a success."

"She's a dear, sweet thing!" murmured Mrs. Lynneker.

"Indeed she is," Jacob agreed, with a touch of embarrassment. Not even to Aunt Mary could he speak of his love for Betty.

"And terribly obstinate when once she has made up her mind about a thing," added Mrs. Lynneker.

Jacob laughed softly. "Perhaps," he admitted.

"But nothing can alter the fact that you two are living in sin," Mrs. Lynneker concluded, with a sudden effort of determination.

Jacob sighed. He knew that argument would be worse than useless with this convinced little lady.

"I wonder if there are not worse things than a sin of this kind?" he said tentatively.

"Worse things?" repeated Mrs. Lynneker, with a suggestion of aggressiveness that carried no conviction.

"What would happen to us if we were separated?" asked Jacob.

"I hope you would try and lead a godly life. I am sure Betty would," said Mrs. Lynneker.

"Betty might; I shouldn't," replied Jacob, with a fearful earnestness. "It would be the end of me morally, and . . . and every way. I suppose there is some inherent weakness in me. I have often been afraid there is. But Betty has, in effect, you know, converted me—spiritually. She has been a wonderful influence. I dare say one ought to be strong and splendid and give her up, but I can't. It isn't a question of what one ought to be, but of what one is. I couldn't do without her now. I simply could not go on living. It's hard to explain, but do you know what I mean?"

Mrs. Lynneker looked up at him with that pathetic droop of her mouth more marked than ever.

"Yes, I know," she said. "But you don't look weak. I shouldn't like to think you were such a poor creature."

Jacob smiled, and she smiled with him—a smile full of humour. "You're not a bit the sort of man I thought you were," she said.

"From Mrs. Parmenter's description?" asked Jacob.

Mrs. Lynneker shook her head. "Never mind where I got my ideas from," she said. "And I didn't say whether you were better or worse than I expected."

"I don't think I could have been worse, could I?" Jacob said. "If I can judge at all from the letters that Betty's family wrote, they seemed to have supposed that I was a professional criminal of the most despicable type."

"Serve you right!" said Mrs. Lynneker; and before Jacob could question that judgment, Betty returned with the fresh tea.

"Well, dear, you left us alone a long time, but I don't know that we've come to any better understanding," remarked her aunt.

"I had to boil the kettle," Betty said, and added: "At all events, you don't seem to have quarrelled very desperately."

"Oh, we have!" returned Mrs. Lynneker. "He's every bit as obstinate as you are. You are two very wicked, self-opinionated young people, and I don't know what's to become of you."

"I steadfastly deny that we are the least wicked," said Jacob. "We aren't hurting anybody . . ."

"Except yourselves," interrupted Aunt Mary.

"But do you know that, so far from hurting ourselves, I am sure that I am a very much better man in every way than I was six months ago?" Jacob said.

Mrs. Lynneker's tea was destined to neglect that afternoon. She put down the fresh cup that Betty had given to her, clasped her hands together, and half-timidly, yet with a strong emotional fervour, began to bear witness for the truth of her gospel.

This message was evidently the one she had come to deliver. Until now she had been confused in its delivery, less by the interruptions of the two people she had to reprove, than by the many excuses her own mind had framed for them. But her opportunity had come at last. Jacob's boast of moral betterment had provided the text for her mission. She had to make it clear to him, and incidentally to Betty, who must have known it all before, that ignorant, feeble humanity was unable to judge its own condition; that this very feeling of righteousness might be, and very probably was, a snare of the Evil One; that the one and only safe guide to conduct was to be found in the Book that God had given us, and that if we despised and rejected that inspired Word, we could only expect misery in this world and eternal punishment in the world to come.

The little lady delivered her message with a fine sincerity. Hers was, indeed, the faith of a little child; and her beautiful honesty and the earnestness of her words deeply affected Jacob, although not in the least in the manner intended by the preacher. He was moved to an admiration of her courage and her sweet simplicity, and he was emotionally glad that she should have the consolation of the religion that so perfectly filled her needs. He tried to find some attitude for himself, some expression that should maintain his own resolution with regard to Betty, while it could in no way give a cause for grief to the bright-eyed little woman who seemed to desire so intensely his soul's welfare.

But when she had finished, she gave him no opportunity for any profession of feeling. No doubt she thought that she had sown the good seed, and that it might, in God's own time, bring forth the fruit of the Spirit. And with her clear duty performed, she dropped the mission of Evangelist as abruptly as she had taken it up.

"My dear, I must go," she said, getting quite briskly to her feet and drawing her mantle together. "If I could get a hansom . . . ?" she suggested, looking at Jacob.

"It isn't easy here," he told her. "Sometimes there's one in Queen Square; but if you could walk as far as Cosmo Place. It's only a few yards, you know. . . ."

She nodded. "Betty will show me," she said.

At the sitting-room door Jacob pointed to the pile of books he had set down on the chair on the landing. He had wished to enter the room unencumbered.

"My week's work," he said. It was the first opportunity he had had of telling Betty that all was well as far as his job on the *Daily Post* was concerned.

She smiled at him, conveying her understanding and pleasure.

Mrs. Lynneker took his hand. "I'm sure you mean well," she said; "and I can see you're both very happy."

Jacob felt that it was a benediction.

7.

He met Betty at the front door as she returned.

"Are you running because you are so eager to get back to me, or because you want the street to know why you went out without a hat?" he asked.

"Both," she said. "Come along. Isn't she a dear?"

"I love her," replied Jacob with enthusiasm.

"And when she gets home, she'll write us a long letter, repeating all that she said this afternoon," Betty said.

"Will she? Why that?" asked Jacob, when they had reached their own rooms on the second floor.

"Because, as she goes back in the train, she'll think that she wasn't emphatic enough."

"Does she do it all conscientiously, to justify her own belief, knowing that she hasn't a chance of altering our opinion, do you suppose?"

Betty shook her head. "She hopes," she said. "She believes so absolutely in sudden conversion. And she thinks that one day something she has said will suddenly take 'root,' as she would say, and that we shall 'see the light,' you know."

"And until that day comes she isn't really so dreadfully vexed with us, I take it?"

"Not now. She likes you."

"I somehow fancied she did," replied Jacob. "She is perfectly human really, isn't she?"

"In spite of her religion?" asked Betty.

"Well, isn't that what you felt about it?"

"I believe I did," Betty acknowledged. "She was so ready to overlook our wickedness on her own account. She didn't once actually find fault with us, did she?"

"Only on religious grounds."

Betty pondered that for a moment. "She is such a dear!" she concluded, and then went on: "Well, and how did you get on?"

"Oh, splendidly!" returned Jacob, and gave her a full account of his interview with Gresswell

"Does it mean more money?" asked Betty.

"N-no, probably not," he admitted; "but it will be rather jolly meeting the other men there, and—well, it's an honour in a way, isn't it?"

She smiled at him. "Wait till your book's finished," she said. "Everyone will be running after you then."

He laughed at her. "Think of the number of novels that are published every year," he said. "Something over a thousand, I believe. I shall be just one of that lot, and a quite undistinguished one at that."

Nevertheless, he was pleased with her and with himself—glad that she should have such faith in him, and in some way glad, too, that he knew his own abilities too well to be flattered into any conceit of them.

"All the same, I do seem to be getting on a little," he said. "You've brought me luck, you dear. And you know," he added, falling into a tone of analytical retrospection, "I'm like that. I can only do my best work when I'm winning. When I used to play chess, I could never fight a losing game. I lost heart. It didn't seem worth while, not worth the big effort. I preferred to give up that game and start another." He paused a moment, and concluded: "I'm a very poor creature, really."

"It seems to me that you've been fighting a losing game all your life," replied Betty.

"Yes, and I should have lost it if I hadn't met you."

"I don't believe it," Betty said, and closed that discussion by adding: "Anyhow, you're winning now, and I must think about getting the dinner."

"I'm blowed if you shall!" protested Jacob. "This is an occasion, and we're going to celebrate it by having dinner at a restaurant—the Holborn, for example."

"It would be rather a treat to eat a dinner I hadn't cooked myself," Betty admitted.

Jacob had never thought of that.

8.

He was mildly extravagant in his ordering of their dinner, but Betty's influence was all towards restraint.

"You're too cautious, dear," he said, when the waiter had gone.

"It frightens me sometimes when I think how little money we've got," was her reply.

"You don't believe in my ability to make more?" he suggested.

"I do," she protested—"you know I do."

"Well, then?"

"That's no reason why we should spend it before it comes."

"No, I know you're quite right," he admitted, "and we won't. But this evening is an occasion, isn't it, with my luck at the office and Aunt Mary's forgiveness? She may pray for us, but she has forgiven us."

"And you feel so pleased with yourself," put in Betty, smiling.

He acknowledged that he did. "I had an idea for my next book this afternoon," he went on. "Shall I tell it to you?"

She nodded eagerly.

"It's slightly fantastic," he explained—"an allegory of sorts, I suppose—and yet the fundamental idea of it comes out of my own experience. The theory is of a man who reacts so tremendously to his circumstances that he is a different person altogether in different conditions. It's an enlargement of the Jekyll and Hyde business in one way, but treated realistically, you know. There would not be any romantic potions or spells."

He paused and looked at Betty for approval, and she made an effort to cover her perplexity and give him the encouragement that she knew he expected.

Jacob laughed. "You don't follow it," he said.

"I do," protested Betty, "only . . ."

"Yes, only . . . of course, I haven't explained myself in

the least. . . . Really, the book is a kind of satire. It comes out of to-day's experience. Imagine, for instance, that my man were to live in Beechcombe Rectory. After six months he would be mentally qualified for a curacy, frightfully earnest Churchman, and that sort of thing. If that were the beginning, it would be very convincing, with just a touch here and there to show how susceptible he is to other influences—an adventure in the beech-woods, perhaps. Then he might come up to town and get into an agnostic set, become a furious agnostic himself, and so on. The idea is that he goes on increasingly reacting to his circumstances until he can be, for all intents and purposes, a dozen different people in one day."

"And what would happen to him in the end?" asked Betty.

Jacob meditated for a moment. "Well," he said, "you see that in his experiences he has always found the people he has lived with and talked to, consistent. Whatever their point of view, they've stuck to it through thick and thin. When facts have proved them in the wrong, they have tried to explain the facts away. But one day he meets the Rector, who was his first influence at the beginning of the book, and, of course, my man naturally begins to talk as if he were just going into the Church. But then he finds that the Rector has chucked his religion, and given up his parish, doesn't believe in anything much; and that gives my man a shock, because he finds that the Rector has no longer any influence, he does not produce any reaction, and then my man discovers for the first time that he has a personality of his own that has been unconsciously growing out of all his reactions."

"What sort of personality?" Betty asked. There could be no doubt that she was interested now.

"Well, he'd be a sort of god, you know," replied Jacob; "not condemning anyone, because he had been everything himself, all-wise and all-loving, with no sort of wish to convert anybody from anything—no creed, no dogma. It won't work, I admit, but I think the allegory is all right; and you

have your choice of morals, because it is implied that you can never convert anyone unless you are absolutely convinced yourself. The first person who wasn't stuck up with his own opinion failed to produce an effect upon my man, you see."

"I think it's a wonderful idea," Betty said.

Jacob's face glowed with enthusiasm. "Do you really?" he insisted. "Of course, you understand that I mean to work it all out with the most convincing realism. There won't be any preaching or explanation in it—just a very serious account of the man's life. I think it will have to be written by another fellow, who takes it all very much in earnest, and sees it all from the outside, so that you get various aspects of the man as seen by another person. The imaginary writer of the book might be always hopeful, right up to the end, of converting the man to some particular doxy or other. I want it to be realistic without being too definite, you know. I should like to leave a little doubt as to whether the man who is supposed to write the book hasn't got hold of the wrong end of the stick now and again."

They discussed the idea eagerly, until the waiter's impatience to be rid of them could no longer be ignored; but when they were back in Great Ormond Street they found that the subject had lost its freshness.

"Of course, you'll finish 'John Tristram' first?" Betty said, after a pause.

"Oh yes, rather!" agreed Jacob, yawning. "I shall put this new book at the back of my mind for the present. But you do think it's a good idea, don't you?"

"I think it's wonderful," Betty said.

"It's odd how things like that come and elaborate themselves in one's mind," said Jacob. "I didn't deliberately invent that story." He was wondering whether this curious phenomenon was not an evidence of genius, and Betty put the thought into words for him. But when the thing was stated, he immediately shrank from so large a claim.

"Something else is wanted, though," he said. "I mean, the ability to express the idea in written words."

"You've got that all right," returned Betty, with confidence.

"We can pretend I have, just between ourselves," he said, smiling. "There can't be any harm in that. But, you dear, loyal darling, please never tell anyone else, will you?"

It seemed to them both that night that fame and wealth were very near.

XIV.

“ JOHN TRISTRAM ”

I.

THE first important step towards the winning of those gifts of celebrity and fortune was to be taken by the publication of “ John Tristram,” but Jacob made little progress with his novel that summer. One reason for his failure was sound enough, as under the new arrangement with the *Daily Post* he was receiving many more books than before, maintaining now a steady average of six or seven every week. Betty frowned, and often wickedly counselled him to be less conscientious in his reviewing. But that was an impossibility for him; he was at once too nervous and too vain to scamp that work. He might, with some return to his old inertia, neglect it, put a book aside unread, and leave it unnoticed until it was out of date; but what he did was done to the best of his ability. But, indeed, that summer he did not shirk the smallest detail. He was too impressed by the sense of responsibility, renewed each week by those visits to the offices of his paper; and the memory of the lesson he had learnt at Trevarrian, the thought of the extra handicap that was laid upon him when he allowed his work to accumulate, also served to brace him and maintain his level efficiency.

There was, however, another influence that was retarding the progress of his novel; he was confronted by a tedious perplexity. By the end of May he had written one hundred and twenty thousand words of Tristram's story, but the dimly visualised end of it all seemed as far away as ever. And as he saw the problem, only two alternatives were open

to him: either he must change his method, and, forsaking his detailed narration, pass over a period of years in half a dozen chapters, or he must rewrite the whole story in a more condensed form. The first remedy was so plainly a makeshift that, whenever he considered it, he ended by resolutely putting it away from him as a temptation to weakness of the familiar kind that had so often undone him in the past. The second was so appalling that only in moments of the most exalted determination could he contemplate the task without a feeling of sick inability. Fortunately, Betty would not hear of that drastic scheme of rewriting the whole novel, and dismissed it without hesitation when he put it before her as the only way out of his difficulty.

"It's all very well," Jacob urged, braced for a moment to the contemplation of splendid endeavour; "but what else can I do? The bally thing will be half a million words long, if I go on as I'm doing now. It would take me two years to finish, and then no publisher would look at it."

Betty wrinkled her forehead. "Couldn't you end it up somehow shorter than that?" she asked.

"I shall spoil it if I do," Jacob said. "The last part of the book would be so absolutely *faute de mieux*; it would look like patchwork."

"I do so want you to finish it," sighed Betty, as if the expression of her wish must in some way induce him to find a solution.

"I want to get it finished too," he said gloomily.

"Well, I'm not going to let you rewrite it, in any case," was Betty's firm decision; and Jacob was relieved by the feeling that he was no longer under any obligation to his conscience.

"I believe it's the right thing to do," he said, by way of finally demonstrating his willingness to undertake the impossible task.

Once, in a moment of despair, he suggested that "John Tristram" should be put on one side for a time, and that he should begin the story of the man who reacted so readily to his circumstances. It was a solution that naturally appealed

to him, the way out he had always adopted. In this, as in other things, he longed to put the past away from him and begin afresh.

"And waste all that you have written?" asked Betty in horror.

"N-no," replied Jacob, fully conscious now of the dishonesty of his suggestion. "It wouldn't be wasted in any case. It—it has been training for me—taught me something about writing."

Betty stared at him in astonishment; she found it difficult to grasp the fact that he could be in earnest. "Do you mean to say that you wouldn't publish 'John Tristram' at all?" she insisted.

"Well, not just yet," he prevaricated, quite evidently afraid of her just indignation.

Betty shrugged her shoulders.

"Don't take it like that, dear," he pleaded. "You know what my difficulty is." A possible excuse occurred to him. "I—I might go on working at 'Tristram' in the intervals between other books, you know," he said, with a touch of eagerness. "Save it up until I'm known as a writer, and then publish it as a sort of *magnum opus*. It would stand a much better chance like that."

Betty's face expressed utter despair. She opened her mouth and shut it again without speaking. And then she stumbled on a plan which finally saved the situation. "If you are going to make a life-work of it, you might as well publish it in parts as you go along," she said.

Her intention was ironical, but Jacob was suddenly fired by an idea.

"Of course, you didn't mean that," he said; "but there's something in it, all the same. I mean, why shouldn't I take 'Tristram' up to a climax of some sort, and let that end this part of the book? I might write an epilogue, or something, to explain that I meant to go on with him later."

"I would sooner you did that than nothing," replied Betty, who had not as yet grasped the possibilities of the situation.

"It's only a logical development of the sequel idea," Jacob

said, searching his mind for a precedent. "And, after all, it is a part of my whole theory that it's absurd to end the life-story of a man at his marriage, or at any other point short of his death for that matter." He hesitated a moment, and then added: "A man of Tristram's sort, of course. It would be another thing if he—crystallised, about middle-age."

And once this possibility of his escape from perplexity had been presented to him, Jacob became enthusiastic to make use of it. He talked it all over with Betty at considerable length, and soon discovered that the impending climax in Tristram's career was, indeed, a natural and logical halting-place in his history.

When she had had time to alter her conception of the book as a whole, Betty began to lose her attitude of concession, and shared something of his excitement.

Meredith had gone back to Cornwall at the beginning of July, but Jacob wrote to him and asked his advice about the extension of Tristram's story into more than one volume, and also as to choice of publisher.

Meredith's reply was not encouraging with regard to the first point—Betty soon overrode his opinion in that respect—but he advised his own publisher as likely, at least, to consider the scheme.

And in face of all difficulties, the truncated story of John Tristram was completed by the beginning of September.

2.

While the manuscript was at the typist's, Jacob wrote a careful letter to Bailey and Williams, Meredith's publishers. He knew that this preliminary was unnecessary, but he wanted to prepare his way for his book's reception. He felt that this method of approach was slightly more dignified and literary than that of dumping his goods on the counter like a commercial traveller.

Now that the book was finished—and even at that moment being read, no doubt, by a diligent typist who might be

intelligent enough to appreciate it—he was conscious of a strong desire to explain its relation to himself and to the average novel. It was not, he wished to say—and did say repeatedly to Betty—so much a novel as an experiment in fiction, and it was only after long argument on the evils of self-deprecation that Betty persuaded him to omit this explanation from his letter to Bailey and Williams.

Their prompt answer, with the stereotyped expression of the pleasure they anticipated from the reading of his book, raised his spirits for a time. It seemed to him that that perfectly orthodox letter conveyed some particular regard for his work, whether because he was a friend of Meredith's, or because, as he hoped, Bailey and Williams had learned in some way of his connection with the reviewing staff of the *Daily Post*. He pictured a keen and inquiring firm of publishers, who made it their business to seek out literary talent. Betty, even more innocent still, did not disguise her certainty that that letter was prompted by knowledge of Jacob's ability.

A reaction came when he received the neat and legible typescript, together with a bill for £9 9s. 3d. The latter scared him only for a moment, but the remarkably altered version of his work took all the confidence out of him. The original manuscript, with its dirty, dog's-eared front pages, was a history not only of John Tristram's, but also of a fragment of Jacob's own life. Differences in the handwriting, alterations in the text, certain smudges and blots, an occasional spot of grease—all these were indications of his own moods and of the conditions in which he had written. Those marks recalled to him the visions that he had so often failed to express. This disgustingly frank typescript had no character; it exposed every weakness of his phraseology with hideous unconcern; it was like some mechanical reproduction of a pencil drawing, displaying the outline, and missing every shade of feeling.

He gave up hope as he laboured over the task of correcting it. (He had been wrong about the idealised typist; she was not intelligent. Some of her mistakes made him blush with

shame. What could she have thought of him, to imagine that he could write such dreadful banalities as some of those she had read into his work? "He sat, his face towards the village . . ." he read, and groaned as he altered it to, "He set his face towards the village. . .") But he hid his despair from Betty. He knew now that the book was amateurish—the worst word he could find—inconsecutive; badly, clumsily written; but it would be a waste of energy to argue with Betty about it; a piece of unnecessary cruelty if he could succeed in disillusioning her. The book must go to Bailey and Williams, and he consoled himself with the thought that he would, in all probability, never meet any member of that well-known firm. They might smile at his temerity in submitting such a hopeless effort at novel-writing, but he would not actually see any evidence of their contempt or pity.

His mood changed again when the manuscript had been sent off and he had received an acknowledgment of its receipt by a postcard, which also informed him that Bailey and Williams would not hold themselves responsible for loss of the manuscript by fire or other disaster. He looked back on the story now with faint approval, and was willing once more to draw confidence from Betty. He could not believe her more daring prophecies, but he began to hope for acceptance.

They decided that they would expect no answer for at least a week. Jacob, with an air of knowledge, explained that a fortnight was the minimum. But both of them were secretly excited by every postman's knock long before the stipulated seven days had gone by. No open reference was made to their fervent anticipations, and when the knock came at the front door of their own house, Jacob would stroll out of the room and go downstairs with an exaggerated assumption of indifference, and, returning, would appear to overlook Betty's quick glance at his face as he entered the room. There was no need for her to ask any question; that one glance was sufficient for her.

"Only a circular for the chap downstairs," was a distressing report to bring; but they could not achieve any sort of contentment until they knew for certain that their fate was

not yet pronounced; impossible for them to sit at ease while that all-important missive might be lying on the mat inside their front door.

Nevertheless, they wearied of expectation before the letter came. Some tired sense in them failed at last to respond to the stimulus of a double-knock. At the end of a fortnight, Jacob was refusing to go downstairs for any post arriving between breakfast and nine o'clock at night.

"It's bound to come by one or other of those," he explained, and instanced his own knowledge of business methods. "We only posted our letters once a day when I was at Price and Mallinson's," he argued. "I dictated them in the morning, and they were brought to me to sign at five o'clock. If it was urgent, we wired or telephoned. And this letter certainly wouldn't seem urgent to Bally Williams"—their usual degradation of the firm's style—"whichever way they answered."

Betty thought the delay might be a good sign. Jacob, with a rather deliberate pessimism, thought it might be a bad one.

"Why don't you begin that other book?" Betty asked one day, nearly a fortnight after John Tristram had gone out on his first adventure. "You've plenty of time now."

"I don't know," Jacob said. "It hardly seems worth while till I've learnt the fate of the first."

"Why not?" she returned; and he hesitated to declare that if the first were refused, he would never write another.

"What difference does that make?" she persisted. "If this publisher refuses it, another won't."

"You think they will refuse it, then?" he put in.

"Don't be so silly!" Betty said. "I don't think so for a minute, but I can't see why you shouldn't begin the next."

Jacob knew that there was no reason, unless he confessed that he was prepared for final discouragement by one refusal.

She returned to the subject at breakfast the next morning, and encouraged him to discuss the detail of his projected fantasy, and Jacob discovered then that in the interval that

had elapsed since their dinner at the Holborn the story had been maturing in the secret places of his mind. All sorts of new and, as it seemed to him, entertaining aspects of the idea bubbled up spontaneously—even a title.

“I might call it ‘The Creature of Circumstance,’” he suggested.

Betty approved the suggestion.

And after breakfast he sat down with the ostensible purpose of making a few notes. He would, he said, plan his book carefully, weigh its construction and proportions in advance. But when he came out eagerly into the little kitchen at half-past twelve, he had made no notes. The opening chapter, he explained, had been so vividly in his mind that he had begun it at once, and wanted now to read the first considerable instalment to Betty without a moment’s delay.

“I’ve done just over fifteen hundred words,” he announced with enthusiasm; “and really, do you know, I think it’s rather good.”

Their enthusiasm for the new book was maintained at high pitch for the next twelve days, and their anticipation of Bailey and Williams’s reply waned in proportion, so that when at last, nearly a month after the manuscript had been sent out, the fateful letter appeared on the breakfast-table one morning, Jacob opened it without realising that this was the message he had so tremblingly desired three weeks before.

“By Jove! this is *it*; it’s from old bally Bill!” he exclaimed, as he caught sight of the notepaper heading.

“Well, what do they say?” asked Betty excitedly, her eyes on his face. “Read it aloud, dear.” She stretched out her hand as if to take the letter from him.

“It’s no go,” Jacob said, and read:

“‘DEAR MR. STAHL’” (the less formal mode of address was no doubt due to Meredith’s introduction),

“‘I am sorry to say that we find we are unable to undertake the publication of your book. It has been sent to two readers, and in each case the opinion is not sufficiently

favourable to justify our taking up the book. So far as I can gather, the book would have had a very fair chance of success a few years ago, but nowadays the competition is so strong that your book's chance is greatly reduced. I am returning the manuscript to you, and, with very many thanks for letting me consider it,

“ ‘Yours very truly,

“ ‘*per pro* BAILEY AND WILLIAMS,

“ ‘STANLEY WILLIAMS.’ ”

“Hardly what you'd call a literary letter,” remarked Jacob. “Four ‘books’ in eight lines, and something integral seems to have been omitted from that last sentence.”

Betty took the letter from him and read it to herself. “What do they mean by saying ‘the book would have had a very fair chance of success a few years ago?’ ” she asked.

“Old-fashioned, I suppose,” Jacob returned, conscious that he was being very brave and careless. “Oh, well, it's no go, dear. I never had much confidence in ‘John Tristram,’ to tell you the truth. Let's forget it, and go on with ‘The Creature of Circumstance.’ I do think that that's coming out rather well. I believe in that, I do, really.”

“What was the name of that new publisher you mentioned the other day?” asked Betty. “Norman something. You said he was publishing rather good stuff.”

“Norman Goodrich,” Jacob said. “Why?”

“Well, the first thing you do after breakfast,” said Betty, “is to sit down and ask him if he will read ‘John Tristram.’ ”

Jacob flushed slightly. “Is it any good?” he asked.

“If you don't write to him, I shall,” replied Betty. “And if he won't have it, it shall go to Methuen's and . . . and Macmillan's, and every publisher in London, if necessary. I'm perfectly certain that ‘John Tristram’ is going to be a big success. Good gracious! haven't you often told me that all the best novels have been refused by publishers at least once? I think you ought to be rather glad that yours has been

refused too. If it had been trash, they would have accepted it directly."

"You darling!" Jacob said.

"Well, will you write to Norman What's-his-name?"

"Rather. Anything on earth to avoid these dreadful scenes," said Jacob, laughing.

"You are—so—hopeless," Betty emphatically advised him. "You give in at the first little thing that goes wrong."

"I—will—write—to—Norman—Goodrich," Jacob asserted, still smiling.

"And I suppose if you'd been alone, you would never have looked at 'John Tristram' again?"

"Probably not."

Betty glanced at him with a pretence of scorn and shrugged her shoulders.

"It wouldn't be worth while if I hadn't got you," he explained.

3.

His first letter to Norman Goodrich was censured out of existence. A self-conscious honesty had influenced him to quite unnecessary explanations concerning the book's refusal by Bailey and Williams, and the peculiarity of the experiment in fiction he was attempting.

Betty had insisted that she must read the letter before it was sent. She read it in ominous silence, and then pulled a chair up to the sitting-room table and sat down.

"I thought you had been in business," was her first comment.

Jacob looked uncomfortable and ruffled his hair. "I'm not going to do anything under false pretences," he said.

"You're not going to send this letter," replied Betty firmly.

Jacob took it from her, read it through again, and then, with a spurt of temper, tore it up. "I don't know that I shall write at all," he said crossly.

Betty smiled. "You know you've been silly," she remarked.

"Is it silly to be honest?" he retorted.

"It isn't a question of honesty," Betty said. "It's simply a matter of business."

"Well, I loathe business," returned Jacob, "I always did. I hate the methods of business; they're *not* honest. It's all an attempt to take advantage of someone else's ignorance."

"Didn't you say that Norman Goodrich had published some very good books?" asked Betty. "Very well, then; can't you trust them to give an opinion on yours without prejudicing them against it to start with?"

Jacob moved uneasily and ruffled his hair still further.

"It doesn't matter what Bailey and Williams think of the book, or what you think of it," Betty continued; "we want to know what Mr. Goodrich thinks of it. You wouldn't prejudice him in its favour, so why prejudice him against it?"

"Well, what sort of letter would you write?" Jacob's tone was distinctly ungracious still.

"I should say that you'd often reviewed the books he had published, and that you have liked them, and think 'John Tristram' will appeal to him."

"Isn't that trying to prejudice him in its favour?"

"I'll write it for you if you find it too much for your conscience," replied Betty. "But it seems to me that that's the exact truth. Isn't it true? If you're sure he won't like the book, we'd better not send it."

"I suppose you're right," remarked Jacob, after a thoughtful pause.

She put out her hand to him, and he took it and kissed it.

"That first letter was rather silly, now, wasn't it?" she persisted.

"Do you wish I were a business man?" he asked.

"No. Thank goodness, you're not!" she said. "But you are rather a troublesome baby sometimes."

The prompt reply that he received to his amended application was signed "C. Norman," and contained a statement to the effect that the firm would be pleased to read Mr. Stahl's

book, even if it were not in typescript. Betty and Jacob seemed to have some little justification this time in assuming a peculiar interest, and more particularly as the reply was received on the evening of the same day.

"Pretty quick work," Jacob thought, and added: "The bally manuscript hasn't come back yet."

"You are really a very wonderful person," he said.

"What's the use of wasting time over a thing when it has got to be done?" she replied, conscious, perhaps, of a slight satisfaction with her own efficiency. And when the manuscript returned, next morning, she took upon herself the business of repacking and redirecting it, and of sending it off by registered post.

When she returned, Jacob told her how in his earlier days he had seldom had the courage to send out again a short story that had been once refused. "I preferred to sit down and write another," he concluded.

"It's a good thing you've got me to look after you," was Betty's comment.

Jacob endorsed that statement with fervour. . . .

They were prepared by experience for a further delay of at least three weeks, and Jacob's interest being still absorbed by the development of his new book, he suffered no such restlessness and incapacity to work as had upset him on the first occasion. The new book was, in his own words, "going splendidly." He was astonished at the ease with which the development of the story came to him, and grudged the time he must necessarily devote to filling the literary columns of the *Daily Post*. "John Tristram" had slipped into the background of his attention; he had come to regard that work as a second string, or as a means for providing a little pleasant excitement.

The manuscript had been despatched to Norman Goodrich on a Tuesday, and Jacob was somewhat depressed the following Monday by his contemplation of the unusually large parcel of books that was set aside for him during the afternoon conclave at the *Daily Post* offices. The development of his new novel was so absorbingly interesting. Even in the

editor's room he had found his thoughts straying. The story of "John Tristram" had never held him like this. And yet Betty was undoubtedly less interested in "The Creature," as they usually called it, than in the first book.

He was debating this curious perversion of literary taste as he descended the stairs, and then, looking down into the entrance-lobby, he was amazed to see Betty herself waiting there for him.

"What on earth . . ." he began, half in dismay, as he hurried across to join her.

"They've accepted it," she said in an eager whisper, and took his arm, to the great interest of the commissionaire, who immediately jumped to the conclusion that Jacob had been "nicely caught this time."

"It came ten minutes after you'd gone," she went on breathlessly, as they went out, "and I simply couldn't wait. Of course, I opened it. I knew what it was."

"What do they say?" asked Jacob.

She produced a rather crumpled letter from the pocket of her jacket, and Jacob backed up against a shop-front and read the wonderful tidings, facing the urgent traffic of Fleet Street.

The letter was quite short.

"DEAR SIR,

"If you could make it convenient to call here on Thursday morning, I should be glad to see you with reference to your novel 'John Tristram.' If that time is not possible, will you kindly suggest another?

"Yours faithfully,

"For and on behalf of Norman Goodrich, Ltd.,

"C. NORMAN."

Jacob folded up the letter and put it in his pocket.

"Aren't you excited?" asked Betty, with a shade of disappointment in her face and voice.

"Let's go and have tea somewhere. I wonder where we could be quiet?" Jacob said, looking vaguely up and down Fleet Street.

He felt immensely elated, and yet tranquil. He could not bring himself to any ordinary expression of pleasure. This was the attainment, he thought, of a life's ambition, and he wanted to contemplate the marvel of it in silence, holding Betty's hand. Smaller achievement might be emphasised by outward demonstrations of rapture; this was too great a thing for any conventional glorying—it was sufficient without that.

But as they searched for the promise of quiet in a Fleet Street tea-shop, he began to criticise his own elation. After all, more than a thousand novels were published every year, the overwhelming majority of them beneath contempt. His was only one more added to the many disastrous essays in fiction.

He looked down at Betty. He meant to belittle his achievement, but the sight of her elation checked him. If he were only one among a thousand, he might, at least, honestly enjoy his triumph with her. She had no doubts or misgivings. Why should he for ever depreciate his own abilities and prospects?"

"It's—it's immense," he said.

"I always knew it was going to be a success," she returned.

"Do say you're excited."

"I am, dear—of course I am—tremendously," he said, and checked his inclination to point out the difference between acceptance and success. Why could he not let himself go? he wondered. It was as if there were some indefinable thing that he was afraid of, some altitude of self-confidence or certainty from which he instinctively shrank.

But when they had discovered a conveniently remote corner in the blankly unattractive basement of a tea-shop opposite the Law Courts, he found a compromise between his own hesitations and his desire to please Betty.

"This makes me keener than ever on the next book," he said. "I do honestly believe in that."

"I believe in this one," replied Betty.

"I wish I had your confidence," said Jacob thoughtfully.

"I don't mean in this book particularly—in myself."

"I shouldn't like you to be too confident," said Betty surprisingly. "It wouldn't be you," she added, by way of explanation.

The need to explain himself could be denied no longer. "Let me tell you how I feel about it," he said. He was warm with exultation, both in the knowledge that his novel had, almost certainly, been accepted, and in the fact that he was so sure of a sympathetic listener. His success was Betty's also. Their interests were so indissoluble.

"Go on, darling," she said.

"You see, this is my form of giving vent to excitement," he began. "I'm stimulated to a sort of self-realisation. And it is so glorious to be able to say it all to you, and know you'll understand."

"Even now you're apologising," she said, smiling.

"I always do, I always shall," affirmed Jacob. "I can't ever be quite sure enough about anything not to hesitate about it. Sometimes I think it's a good thing to be like that—for me, anyhow; it wouldn't do for a Cabinet Minister, or a General, or a parson, I admit. But about writing, dear; I do have moments of quite extraordinary confidence before the book, or whatever it is, is finished. About this next book, for instance, I think sometimes that it's going to be great—I do really. But I can't delude myself about a thing when it's done, and I should be afraid to say so to anyone but you, because it looks so like false modesty; pretending to run down your own stuff has the air of fishing for compliments. But I do *know* about 'John Tristram,' for instance, that although it has got some good work in it of a sort, that it isn't in any sense a great book. Yes, I dare say you think so, but it isn't, dear, really it isn't. And I don't want to think it is, even when I am alone with you. I don't mind making up fairy tales about it, talking of tenth editions and things like that; but I should hate to think that 'John Tristram' was the best thing I could do; and in some way I should hate even to be satisfied with my own writing." He paused a moment, and added: "Not that there is the least chance of it."

"Aren't you satisfied with 'The Creature'?" asked Betty.

"I'm excited about it now," replied Jacob. "I dare say I shall hate it when it's finished."

"I wonder if you'll ever get tired of me?" said Betty, with apparent irrelevance.

"Hardly the same thing, is it?" asked Jacob, laughing.

"I'm not sure," Betty said.

"But, darling, it's only the things I do myself that I feel like that about," he expostulated.

"Well, but isn't it because you get tired of them?"

"Surely not," Jacob remonstrated; but in his own mind he was not absolutely sure that fatigue had not something to do with the disgust he felt for his own writing after it was done.

"It's so absolutely different," he explained. "I'll admit that I do get tired of people too; but you . . . you're my complement, you're so inevitable . . . you're wife and sister and mother and intimate friend all in one. Do you know what I mean?"

She nodded, conscious that he had been too explanatory. He was finding words for their relationship now; a year ago he had been inarticulate, but more convincing. She did not doubt him, she knew that his need for her was overwhelming, but she recognised a difference in his feeling for her. He was more tender and less passionate than he had been before she went to Cornwall. His present attitude was that she had once wished to find him in, and now she missed the very quality she used to deprecate.

"Of course, I know, dear," she said fondly. "Am I really all that to you?"

"Much, much more than that," he responded. "I shouldn't have cared a hang about this book being taken, if it weren't for you. As a matter of fact, I should never have finished it, of course."

4.

They were just preparing to go, when Jacob recognised an acquaintance a few tables away from them.

"Hallo!" he said softly. "Do you see that chap in the top-hat, Betty? Down the room on the right-hand side?"

"Yes. Do you know him?" she asked.

"Rather," remarked Jacob, with a subdued emphasis. "I used to be envious of him once. We were in the same office, writing advertisements, you know; and he was the success and I was the failure."

"What's his name?" Betty said.

"Farmer."

"Are you going to speak to him?"

"I think so; why not?"

Betty evidently had some reserve in her mind. "I'll go on," she said.

"Oh, why?" asked Jacob. "I shall only just say something as we go by."

"Did he . . . did he know . . . Lola?" Betty said, with a look of half-wistful perplexity.

"Oh, Lord, no!" replied Jacob with emphasis. "It was long after we separated, and in any case he wouldn't have known her. He wasn't the sort of man one asked to dinner, I mean."

"I don't think I want to know him either," Betty said.

"How funny of you," commented Jacob; "but it doesn't matter."

He was a little vexed. Here was the very contretemps he had pictured: the opportunity to make his little boast of success before one who had known him as an unsuccessful writer of advertisements.

"There's no reason why *you* shouldn't speak to him," Betty said, noticing Jacob's petulance.

"Why are you so afraid of being introduced?" he asked.

"I'm not. I don't see what good it is, that's all. We shall probably never see him again," replied Betty. She could not have defined her reason for wishing to avoid this association with Jacob's past, but she was quite determined that she would avoid Mr. Farmer. She could not face a formal introduction to him as Jacob's wife. She felt, despite all Jacob's assurances that Farmer had never known Lola, that in some subtle way he must guess that her own relations with Jacob were irregular. And this strange Mr. Farmer was not an

attractive person. He was rather stout, seedily overdressed, and he had a coarse, common face. He was not the sort of man, she thought, that Jacob ought ever to have been familiar with.

"You stop and speak to him, dear; I'll go on," she said. She rose and picked up the little white ticket from the dirty, marble-topped table. "I'll wait for you outside," she added.

"I can't understand why . . ." began Jacob, but she only smiled at him and went out. Mr. Farmer stared at her as she passed him.

Jacob had mislaid a glove, and by the time he found it, pressed into the crumb-stored fold between the back and the seat of the American-cloth covered settee on which they had been sitting, Betty was half-way up the stairs. He followed her with a self-sacrificing determination to cut Farmer dead. He did not know why he should, but he believed that for some strange reason Betty desired this abnegation.

But Mr. Farmer was not an easy person to cut.

"Hello!" he said, as Jacob, with a studiously distracted air, prepared to pass. "Hello, Stoll!" he repeated, and leaned over the table and drew Jacob's attention by prodding him with an umbrella.

"Hallo, Farmer! I didn't see you," lied Jacob.

"Not grown any thinner either," remarked Farmer. "Where you been all this time? And who's the lady?"

Jacob blushed. "That was my wife who just went out," he said.

Mr. Farmer twisted his short neck in an effort to look up the stairs. "Gone in for the holy state, have you?" he said. "So've I, worse luck."

Jacob could find no answer to this, short of an elaborate explanation of his own happiness; so he changed the conversation by saying: "What are you doing now?"

"Gone back to the old shop, for the time being," replied Farmer. "But I've got a big thing on. However, can't tell you about that just yet. You'll hear of it before long. What you doing? Anything particular?"

This was the opportunity Jacob had pictured, but he felt that just as it was impossible to explain his happiness in Betty to Farmer, so would it be not less futile to boast of any literary success. He realised it instantly as he looked at the rather stout, rather shabbily smart man before him. Farmer would want to know whether this sort of writing "paid." He could not appreciate the glory of having a novel accepted, and in any case he would certainly write down half of any possible statement as brag.

"Oh, I'm doing all right," Jacob said, and added quickly, "Well, I must be getting on, I'm afraid. My wife will be waiting for me."

Farmer grinned. "Like that already, is it?" he said. "Well, so long, see you again some time. You look out for that big thing of mine in the papers just after Christmas."

"Well, did you speak to him?" asked Betty, when Jacob joined her in the Strand.

"He prodded me with an umbrella," Jacob said.

"Did you tell him about your book?"

"No. He asked who you were, and I said you were my wife, and he then remarked that he was married too, worse luck. After that I had nothing more to say to him of any kind. Betty, you were quite right. We haven't anything to say to people like Farmer; I can't begin to make myself understood by them. Not in the simplest ways. But how did you know?"

"I didn't know," Betty said. "I only felt that I didn't want to be introduced to him."

"It wasn't because you are still afraid of meeting people . . . anyone?"

"No." She said it quite readily and definitely, but she did not deceive him. Her denial had the same quality as those earlier reservations in Cornwall. Jacob made no reply, but each of them knew with illuminating distinctness what was in the other's mind. He was on the verge of another protestation, a warning that she must conquer this shrinking of hers; she was prepared to reply that she must be left to fight the thing out for herself, that she would "get over it . . . in time."

They held the suspense for a few moments, each framing an attitude, as clearly conscious of the old argument as if the dispute was fiercely in progress; and then Jacob determinedly relinquished it. It was true, he thought, that she must win her way to confidence by her own effort; he must not harry her.

The possibility of a graceful escape from the impending argument was provided by the sight of a grim and solid block of offices a few yards farther down the Strand.

"That's Price and Mallinson's—my old place," said Jacob, with an assumption of brisk interest. "Farmer is there still, you know."

"Aren't you glad to be out of it?" asked Betty, with evident relief.

"My goodness, yes," Jacob said with enthusiasm.

The recovery was finally achieved by Betty taking his arm and asking brightly: "Who's had a novel accepted?"

"We have," returned Jacob, on the same note of sprightliness.

He felt as if they had had a quarrel and had beautifully made it up again.

5.

"I don't quite know where we are going," remarked Jacob presently. "Couldn't we *do* something—to celebrate the occasion?"

"Oh, let's go and tell Freda," suggested Betty. "She'll be so interested."

"Do you think she will?" asked Jacob doubtfully.

He had not seen Freda more than half a dozen times during the past six months. She seemed to be greatly preoccupied with her management of the boarding-house, and seldom found time to come to Great Ormond Street in the evening. She had the whole affair on her hands now, for Mrs. Parmenter had gone to bed one day at the end of April, and had remained in bed ever since. She had definitely announced her nearly approaching end on several occasions, had made her last provisions for the settlement of her affairs, and bidden farewell

to Freda and the hastily-summoned Betty. And after each solemn leave-taking she had waked the next morning, distinctly cheered and invigorated by the previous evening's excitement.

Jacob had said that she would probably go on for years in the same condition. He showed no generosity of spirit in his attitude towards Mrs. Parmenter. He could not forgive her libel of him. He was bitter enough to astonish Betty, who had at first tried to reason with his evident animus.

"Poor old thing, she's so old!" had been her attempted palliation of Mrs. Parmenter's fault.

"Old enough to be a little more charitable," Jacob had snapped, and had added: "And all this dying business once a fortnight annoys me."

"She really thinks she's dying, dear," Betty had answered, and Jacob had looked scornful disbelief.

Nor was Freda in his good books. He believed that she doubted and suspected him; and he deprecated—although he had never openly expressed his displeasure—Betty's almost daily visit to Montague Place to help with the housework. He would have tried to dissuade her from that occupation if he had not seen that some such distraction was necessary for her. Their own little suite of rooms was soon disposed of. They had agreed that Jacob's attention must not be distracted during the morning by her presence in the sitting-room; and if she did not go to help at Montague Place, what was there for her to *do*? as she put it. Her temperament so obviously demanded an employment of some kind.

In his mind Jacob gloriously planned an extension of their own resources, that should allow them to live in a flat large enough to provide Betty with permanent interest at home. He deluded himself with the belief that he considered it below Betty's dignity to help in the boarding-house; but in his most honest moods he could not disguise the fact that he was jealous of Betty's intimacy with Freda Cairns, as she now frankly called herself.

And for these reasons the suggestion that they should celebrate the occasion of "John Tristram's" acceptance by

carrying the news to Montague Place was not one that aroused his enthusiasm.

"I don't suppose Freda will be the least interested," he said.

"You're so funny about Freda," returned Betty. "She's awfully fond of you."

"I doubt it," Jacob said. "I doubt it quite immensely."

"I know she is," was Betty's decided answer.

"You think everybody likes me."

"I don't! I know Mrs. Parmenter doesn't."

"You can tell Freda about it to-morrow morning. I've never been to that beastly place since I left last August."

"I don't know why you should call it a 'beastly' place. You met me there, anyhow."

"And took you away from it."

"I wish you'd come," persisted Betty. "I want you to."

They had reached Charing Cross Post Office by this time, and she led him round the corner and stopped to plead her cause in the lee of the railings of Morley's Hotel.

"We can take a bus up to the corner of Russell Street, if you don't want to walk any farther," she said by way of inducement.

Jacob smiled. "That doesn't tempt me," he said. "But if you want me to come, I suppose I shall. But I can't for the life of me see why you want me to."

"I want to tell Freda," Betty said, as though that were surely conclusive; and then, seeing that Jacob was about to repeat his former suggestion that to-morrow was time enough for that, she went on. "I do wish you would be nicer to her. Of course *she* thinks that you don't like *her*. Why don't you?"

"I would if she'd let me," replied Jacob.

"Well, come and tell her about the book now," pleaded Betty.

"I suppose I may just as well be gracious about it and say 'Yes' at once," remarked Jacob. "When once you've made up your mind to a thing . . ."

"It isn't that," Betty said vaguely, as they crossed the road to take the yellow Camden Town bus.

XV.

MRS. PARMENTER

1.

FREDA was at the window as they passed and opened the door to them.

"I thought you were never coming," she said; and then to Jacob: "It was nice of you to come, too."

He was puzzled. "Did you expect us . . ." he began, but Betty understood.

"Is she . . .?" was her brief indication of essentials, and she looked quickly up the stairs.

"Yes; but really this time," Freda said. "Come into the drawing-room, there's no one there."

"She's been unconscious since four o'clock," she went on hurriedly when they were in the drawing-room. "And I sent round for you, and you were out. Jane said she'd left a message. Didn't you get it?"

"We haven't been back," explained Betty. "But . . ."

"I'm afraid so," Freda said. "The doctor's up there now."

They spoke quickly, in subdued voices; there was an air of hushed eagerness about them as if they were utterly absorbed by this business of Mrs. Parmenter's illness.

"Is she in the room overhead?" asked Jacob in his ordinary voice; and they both turned and looked at him, apparently startled by his noisy intrusion into the sibilance of their speech.

"Oh no," Freda said. "She's in her own room."

"I thought, as you were whispering . . ." began Jacob, but

they turned away from him and continued their own conversation.

"Has he been here long?" Betty asked.

"About twenty minutes," Freda said.

Jacob walked over to the window and left them to the discussion of Mrs. Parmenter's symptoms. He was negligible just now. They knew that he was lacking in interest and sympathy, and this affair was so engrossing that they threw aside any pretence of considering his feelings. He was merely a subsidiary male, quite useless and superfluous at this moment. Freda had said it was nice of him to come, but having come, his duty was to remain silently in the background.

And what was it all about? he wondered. If this old woman were really dying at last, why should her death be regarded as a solemn and important occasion? She had done nothing in the world. She had failed to hold her husband's affection. He could picture that ménage: the inactive Parmenter and his critical, acid, middle-aged wife. No doubt she had nagged him. Jacob remembered how she had taken himself to task about the question of making love to Betty. She had been nervous then. He was a stranger and not subject to her authority, but he had had a glimpse of her possibilities. Her methods with a dilatory husband would have been more pronounced. And after she had made his life unbearable, practically thrown him into the arms of another woman, she had made an immense grievance of his desertion. All the conventions of her world exhibited her as the injured, outraged person. That she made her husband's life unbearable was a venial fault, that he should desert her was a heinous sin. Without question she had prided herself on having always been "faithful" to him.

Jacob's thoughts took another turn, and his analysis wandered into uncertain depths. It was not Mrs. Parmenter's fault, he reflected; she could not be other than she was. There were thousands, hundreds of thousands, of women like her. She had had no child, but if she had, her tragedy might well have been repeated. She could not beget love; probably

no one had ever felt love for her; her child, son or daughter, might have left her also—they would not have suffered the social condemnation heaped upon their father, but their mother would have found cause for another grievance. She cherished those grievances; they gave her a faint importance. Jacob did not know whether she had ever fervently desired love; he had seen no signs of such a desire, but certainly she craved for consideration. She had enjoyed a little dignity as the spectacular head of that boarding-house; she had immensely enjoyed the dignity of those deathbed romances.

All her life she had done nothing, added nothing to human happiness. So far as Jacob could see, she had lived in vain, conforming to the little rules of conduct that constituted, for her, the whole law of life; she had never loved, never borne children, never sacrificed herself, never faced existence. Yet, now that this useless and insignificant unit was dying, she had become enormously significant and important. The house was full of whispering and anxiety. Presently the blinds would be down, and passers-by would look up at the windows and feel a sudden chill. . . .

It was not Mrs. Parmenter that was of importance; it was death invading the respectability of civilisation.

Jacob turned round and saw that Betty had taken off her hat and coat. Freda was just leaving the room.

"Are you going to stay?" he asked.

"I must help Freda," Betty said. "There's no reason why you should stay if you don't want to." She held up her hand. "Listen," she said, "the doctor's just coming down."

"Well, and what if he is?" replied Jacob fretfully. "You won't help him by listening to his steps on the stairs."

Betty pushed his quibble on one side. "Sh! I want to hear," she said.

Jacob felt stifled, frustrated. "My dear Betty, don't be so silly," he said. "Freda will be back directly to tell you precisely what the doctor has said. You won't know a moment sooner by listening now."

She turned her head and looked at him as if he had called to

her from another room. "Why are you so peevish?" she asked. "I only wanted to hear whether it *was* the doctor or not. I wish you'd go if you want to. There's no reason why you should stay."

"Is there any reason why *you* should?" he said.

"We may have to sit up with her," replied Betty.

"Do you mean that you may be here all night?"

She was giving him her attention now. "Darling, I'm so sorry," she said. "It is hard lines on you, I know. But I couldn't leave it all to Freda, could I? She's no one except Jane to do anything."

Jacob suffered a sudden reaction. The quotation, "A ministering angel, thou," rose to his consciousness. "It's just like you, of course," he said, and added quickly: "Yes, I suppose you must stay, dear; but I don't think I will, unless I can help in any way."

"You can get dinner out," Betty suggested.

He nodded, and found himself listening attentively to the rumble of a man's voice in the hall. Neither he nor Betty spoke again until they heard the front door gently closed, and the sound of the doctor's feet going quickly down the steps outside. Jacob instinctively moved towards the window, and was rewarded by the sight of a top-hat and the back of a grey overcoat with a black velvet collar.

As he turned back to the room, Freda came in.

"It was Dr. Paramore," she said, as though that were a fact of importance. "He says that she mayn't recover consciousness."

"Will it be long?" asked Jacob.

"He can't say," Freda replied. "It might be two or three days, he thinks—not longer."

They stood in a group near the middle of the room. Jacob had been caught by the ominous mystery of it all now, and it was he who broke the silence that had suddenly come upon them. "What is it, exactly?" he asked.

"Old age chiefly, I think," Freda said. "Dr. Paramore thought that she had probably ruptured some little blood-vessel in the brain—a kind of apoplexy, you know. It isn't

uncommon, he says." She paused a moment, and then added: "There won't be any difficulty about the certificate."

"I shall stay and sit up with her, of course," said Betty quickly, as though she wished to cover up that last practical aspect of the affair disclosed by Freda.

"Of course you won't," Freda returned.

For a minute or so they argued that point. Jacob saw that both of them knew perfectly well that Betty would stay, but the argument was a necessary formula.

"What about you?" said Freda, turning to him.

"Oh, I shall be all right," Jacob said. "Is there anything I could do for you?"

"I don't think so, thanks very much," Freda told him.

They both came with him to the door, and he whispered a good-bye to Betty in the hall.

2.

Even when he came into the lamplit street, that air of expectancy and subdual remained with him for a moment, so that he frowned at the clamour of a whistling errand-boy who rattled past him on a leisurely carrier-tricycle.

And then he recovered himself and went on into Bedford Square with a grateful sense of freedom. The clatter of a horse's hoofs and the jingle of a passing hansom completed his feeling of liberation. He wanted to shout. There was no reason why he should be gloomy, silent and depressed. Betty would soon be back with him, and he had had his novel accepted. They had never told Freda. It would have been impossible to tell her. He wondered why.

The whole affair had been strange in its orthodoxy. All that creeping silence had been usual, the accepted attitude, and he had been intrigued into it. But in this case, at least, it had been quite meaningless. The old woman upstairs had been unconscious. They would not have disturbed her if they had played the piano. Yet that would have seemed, and still seemed to him, an impossible outrage.

He pictured the boarders at dinner. Perhaps Betty would

be at the head of the table. She would not tell the boarders that Mrs. Parmenter was dying; if possible, they would not be told until she had been taken out of the house. Death was not only ominous, it was also slightly indecent, a thing to be avoided by any respectable boarding-house. But the boarders would be told that she was very ill, so that the possibility of outrage by noise might be lessened.

Not one of them all was devoted to Mrs. Parmenter, but she had reached her hour of supreme importance—and was unaware of it now that it had come. Had she been endowed with some gift of prevision that had warned her to anticipate the opportunity she could never use? At least she had had, and no doubt enjoyed, the simulacrum, although the reality was denied to her. Curiously enough, Freda and Betty had seemed to know that those earlier ceremonies had been a sham. The last time she had been sent for, Betty had been a little annoyed. They had no doubt now. They recognised the shadow when it came. And it was to that they deferred; that was the figure to which they paid their terrified tribute. The withered old woman on the bed was only honoured for the company she was keeping.

A hot, sour smell penetrated Jacob's abstraction, and he came back into the world of life, to find that he was at the intersection of Oxford Street and Tottenham Court Road. The big factory over the way had been manufacturing vinegar that afternoon. He turned westwards with a touch of impatience, and struggled through the group of people who were waiting for the buses. He was pleasantly absorbed by his meditations. It seemed to him that this slight experience had given him a new insight into the problem of life. His mind was deliciously clear and active, his thoughts a fascinating entertainment. He found an Italian restaurant a little way past Wardour Street, and went in and ordered dinner.

For a time he was distracted by his surroundings and the detail of his meal, but when he had finished, the current of his thought began to flow again, powerful with new suggestions.

Why, he wondered, should Mrs. Parmenter be watched through the night? The more primitive animal sought loneliness when the last call came. There was a reason for that: the necessity to find refuge. The wild had no pity for the injured and the dying. The old wolf was the prey of the pack. But civilisation attended—and watched. Was it to console and cheer the departing visitor? Mrs. Parmenter was not expected to recover consciousness; still there was a hope, probably. And if she did become aware of life again at the last, it must be presented to her in human form. She must be held back, if possible, for another hour, even for another five minutes. Although she was old, and there was no possible chance of her recovery, they must keep her alive as long as they could; snatch for her a day, an hour, a minute more of earth; fight desperately lest the eternity she anticipated should be prolonged by one unnecessary fraction of time.

(Could one prolong eternity? According to the Christian theory, eternity had certainly one end—the beginning!)

Why did not the spirit, slowly disentangling itself from the flesh, come to despise the garment it was beginning to wear so lightly? Even now, in the flush of health, Jacob felt that he could look down upon and despise his body, with its contemptible necessities for food and toilet, its everlasting demand upon the attention. Its outlines might be beautiful, subject for the theme of the highest art; but the detail of its functions, its perpetual decay and the means of its renewal, was disgusting, something one did not dare to contemplate. He found an image in the remembrance of that vinegar factory. . . .

Yet it seemed that the departing spirit clung fondly to that chemical laboratory which had been the temporary vehicle of its expression; or if it did not—and he had heard that “the pangs of death” was a romantic phrase justified only by rare exceptions—it was certainly assumed to do so by the living. And the misconception did not end there, for after death this disgusting, useless body was honoured, cased in lead and walnut, loaded with flowers, carried in a glass case, and put away with propitiatory ceremonies.

"Lord, what rot it all is!" thought Jacob. He was exalted and happy, miraculously rediscovering for himself all the old, neglected truths that shine so brightly when they are our own treasure-trove.

And the creative spirit stayed with him until he was nearly home in Great Ormond Street. It failed rapidly at last—he had begun to digest his dinner, no doubt—but left him with an afterglow of resolution to make a practical use of his momentary illumination. He had had new experience that day, and had profited by it. He must use this new knowledge of his in a future novel. There was no room for it in "The Creature of Circumstance," but in the second part of "John Tristram" he might find, or make, an opportunity.

The rooms in Great Ormond Street seemed horribly empty and desolate. After he had lit the lamp he went into the bedroom, and reflected that he and Betty had never before been separated for more than an hour or two since she came to him in Cornwall.

He wanted to tell her what he had been thinking, and also to anticipate his interview with Norman Goodrich. He remembered that he must write and confirm that appointment. He hesitated for a moment, wondering if to-morrow would not do as well. There was plenty of time—too much time. Why had they not said Wednesday instead of Thursday? Finally he sat down and wrote the letter, because he thought Betty would commend his promptitude. She kept him up to these things. She was like a strong, invigorating current of life to him. Without her he was incomplete.

He pictured her in that upstairs room, watching through the long night, watching the disintegrating figure of old age that fought to remain a few moments longer out of Paradise.

3.

The struggle lasted until the small hours of Thursday morning.

Jacob conceived some kind of picture from the reports of a tired Betty, whom he saw at intervals either when he called to

make inquiry at Montague Place, or when she returned to Great Ormond Street for a few hours' rest from the expectant atmosphere of the boarding-house.

Nothing could be done for the patient except force a little nourishment into her. Death was creeping up from her feet as an invading paralysis that slowly ousted the forces of life with unrelenting pertinacity. She lay perfectly still, her mouth slightly open, and gave no sign that she still lived other than by the amazingly rapid and faintly stertorous breathing that went on almost regularly, as fast as the tick of a clock, except that now and again a little pause, a second's cessation would snatch the attention of the watcher back to the figure on the bed.

But a fate he would have avoided brought Jacob an actual sight of the patient on Wednesday evening.

He had gone to Montague Place after tea to make inquiries. He had not seen Betty since ten o'clock, when she had returned from their rooms to release Freda, who had been keeping the night vigil.

Jane opened the door to him.

"She's just the same," she said confidentially—her manners were not those of the trained servant—"and when you came you was to come in, please, because you're wanted."

Jacob's heart sank. What could they want him for? he wondered.

Betty came to him in the drawing-room. "Do you think you could go up and sit with her for an hour, dear?" she said, as soon as she had kissed him. She was evidently in a great hurry.

"Oh, Lord!" ejaculated the horrified Jacob.

"Would you mind very much?" Betty asked. "I thought . . . you see, Freda's asleep. She didn't go to lie down until three o'clock. And Jane has got her hands full, and there's no one to cook the dinner. We had a woman in yesterday, but she couldn't come to-day." She looked at him doubtfully. "Of course, if you'd much sooner not," she said. "I must go back now, in any case. She's all alone."

"*Must* she be watched?" asked Jacob.

"Yes, dear, of course she must," Betty told him.

He knew that he could not dispute that confident statement by any general argument, nor was his next suggestion any more acceptable. "Why not let the boarders get dinner out to-night? Just for once, surely, it wouldn't matter . . . under the circumstances."

Betty shook her head gravely. "Oh, we couldn't!" she said conclusively.

Jacob was stirred by a feeble irritation. Women were so stubbornly conservative. They would endure anything rather than break a meaningless rule of everyday conduct. Here were Betty and Freda, both of them intelligent women, yet they would slave to maintain at almost any sacrifice to themselves, either such an empty form as this watch by the dying, or such a trivial expediency as the common routine of a boarding-house. He could not see, then, anything fine or splendid in their self-sacrifice; he was merely annoyed because he judged it a concession to a foolish rule-of-thumb, implying an inability to adapt themselves to unusual conditions. And he hated the thought of sitting in that dreadful room upstairs.

"I can't see why . . ." he began fretfully.

"It doesn't matter, dear; we'll manage somehow," Betty said. She showed no kind of annoyance, but he thought he saw the signs of disappointment in her face, as if she had counted on him, and he had failed her. "I must go back now, anyway," she added. "I don't suppose I shall be home until to-morrow morning."

Jacob was ready with a dozen excellent reasons to prove that all this business was no concern of theirs, that this watching was a futile superstition, that the boarders might quite well shift for themselves on this one unprecedented occasion; but he looked at Betty, hesitated, and said:

"I'm sure I don't know why I should mind so much."

"It's quite natural that you should," Betty said.

He was conscious of his utter selfishness. The mood of irritation that had instantly and automatically opposed the suggestion that he should sit with Mrs. Parmenter, had in some inexplicable way been allayed by Betty's accession to

his refusal. He had been released from any pressure to perform that revolting duty, and was ashamed of his victory.

"I'll go, dear," he announced impulsively.

She put her hands on his shoulders and kissed him. "I don't want you to go if it will upset you," she said.

"It won't. Why should it?" he returned. "It's idiotic to be so squeamish. Come along. Take me up now."

He had crossed some mental obstacle. He was prepared and determined now, already regarding this horrible duty as an experience to be endured and then added to his knowledge of life.

It was Betty who hesitated.

"Are you quite sure . . ." she began.

"Darling, if it was only for your sake," he interrupted her. "But I should feel so mean if I couldn't do something, after all you've been doing."

"She's a sort of relation of mine, you see," Betty said.

But when he was on the stairs he had a brief reaction. He was cold and trembling, as if he were about to witness some obscene thing that should be hidden from all knowledge of humanity.

He stopped Betty on the landing. "I shan't have to *do* anything," he whispered. "I—I couldn't touch her."

She shook her head with decision. "She can't even move," she said. "If there's any change, ring the bell. I'll come."

4.

Mrs. Parmenter lay on her back. Her toupee was gone, and Jacob saw that she was nearly bald; a few wisps of dead white hair was all that stragglingly covered the faintly pink dome of her skull. And she was changed in other ways also. The invading paralysis was releasing the tension of long habit, and the lines about her mouth were relaxed and smoothed, the grey-black brows had fallen farther forward over the hollow that cased the closed but slightly distended eyelids.

Jacob would not have recognised her if he had been asked to identify her in a hospital ward; but the very strangeness

of her appearance relaxed his apprehension. Nevertheless, he was profoundly shocked; and one detail curiously held his attention, and for some reason appeared to him more particularly obscene. She lay with her arms out of bed, her withered hands resting limply on the counterpane; and she was wearing a fine linen night-dress, with lace at the neck and wrists and down the crumpled bosom. It was the intimate garment appropriate to tenderness and youth, and it clung, still with some suggestion of invitation and feminine allurements, to this terrible, inhuman figure of age and decay.

He had sat down near the window when Betty had left him, and had gently closed the door behind her. He was no longer intimidated, save by the burden of his responsibility. This paralysed stranger on the bed, who remotely resembled the old woman he had known, was too helpless and too quiet to be any cause for fear. He could not have borne to witness agony, but once he had become used to the unnatural sound of that short, rapid breathing, he was comparatively at ease. Betty had sat in this chair, alone, through the endless night, he remembered, with no one within easy call.

But his sense of responsibility was painfully quickened. He could find no consolation now in his perfectly reasonable attitude of Monday evening. This palpitating thing that he watched was a living creature whose pain must necessarily evoke his sympathy and care. She might be finally doomed, but while she could still suffer in the body, it was his duty and his wish to tender any alleviation of the pain of her departure.

Here was one answer, he reflected, to his earlier, detached analysis of this business of guarding the dying. And as he sat in that dingy, old-fashioned room, which had a character different from any other room in the house, as if this one room alone had retained the odour and associations of 1860, whilst the others had developed with the century, he found a second answer that appeared to him still more convincing.

It was not only for the patient's good that there was a necessity for this watch, it was even more for one's own. The evidence of carelessness in such a case as this was the mark of selfishness, of the failure of sympathy. One gained by

giving—the more unconsciously, the better. That failure of sympathy had been his own fault; he was inclined to be too detached, to weigh motives too intellectually. He brought too much judgment and too little feeling to his relations with humanity. How quickly he had resented Betty's proposition downstairs, and how ready he had been with apparently sound arguments to prove that the tiny act of sacrifice demanded from him, was superfluous and unreasonable! He lacked charity and understanding. He did not surrender himself in order to enter into life. Betty and Freda did the thing unconsciously. Theirs was the real intuition, the direct apprehension and sympathy without any inductive or other conscious mental process.

He looked out at the dead silhouette of the British Museum, outlined against the dull glow of the sky, and strangely pierced here and there by the yellow oblong of a lighted window. He felt that it was in some sense a symbol, as if all his view of life could bring him no more than the dim suggestion of a lit interior against the darkness. He had been too preoccupied with the survey of that great blank outline; the essential thing was the realisation of that shining interior. . . .

Perhaps he had always misjudged Mrs. Parmenter. How did he know, how could he possibly know, what she had taken from life and what she had given?

He was still absorbed in his metaphor when that short, quick breathing, to the sound of which he was already so accustomed that it no longer distracted his attention, was suddenly interrupted. It was as if the engines of a liner had been unexpectedly stopped. Jacob felt his heart leap as he instantly turned to the bed. But it was only a momentary catch in the machinery that still worked the functions of that limp, unknowing body. A pause of two seconds, perhaps, accompanied by a hard rasping in the dry throat, and then the furious race began again, if anything more desperately than before.

Jacob listened, and wondered if he ought to call Betty. He moved his chair a little nearer, and brought himself to watch the still figure on the bed. Once he thought her eyelids

twitched, but he could not be sure. The flaring gas-burner was leaping now and again within the globe of its opal glass shade, and threw queer shadows on the bed. He got up, tip-toed over to the bracket, and turned the gas a little lower. It still flickered as if in a draught, although he could feel no movement of air in the room. He remembered the superstition of the "winding-sheet" in the candle.

Perhaps Mrs. Parmenter was actually dying at that moment. He stood by the bed and looked more closely at her. Her loose lips were puffed outwards by each sharp exhalation, fell back, and were blown out again; but there was no other movement, except a hardly perceptible distension and contraction of the thin, wrinkled throat.

He stood staring, fascinated. That lax mobility of the lips was horribly inhuman; it suggested the feeble, inert motion of inanimate matter. The spirit, the will, was no longer in control; the flesh was alive, but its life was separate from that of the organism as a whole. What force still animated the beating heart and the panting lungs, Jacob wondered? Was that, too, become mechanical, or had the higher organs of the body a separate existence subsidiary to the conscious life of the individual—an existence that might be continued for a time after the spirit had gone?

If the mind of Mrs. Parmenter did not re-awake to what we call consciousness before that game old heart and lungs tired of the lonely struggle and fluttered wearily to a standstill, who could say when the spirit had fled, or when the individual he had known had actually died? Would it be possible to galvanise the mind back to action and control by some tremendous shock, or was it beyond the reach of any physical stimulus? He knew that the old theory of the recovery of consciousness, the sudden clearness and enlightenment that immediately preceded death, was only a fable in cases such as this. The uncontrolled machinery of the body maintained its functions for a time, and then ran down, rattled out into silence.

Mrs. Parmenter's spirit might be moving through dreams of Paradise while her deserted body, fighting for its own

existence, sought to keep open a dwelling-place for the occupant who could never return. . . .

It seemed incredible to him, then, that anyone could ever die. This thing that he watched was not Mrs. Parmenter. She was away somewhere, and the body she had occupied was already strangely altered. It was losing the impression that she had stamped upon it in her seventy years of life, reverting to some original mould that might possibly figure the representative type of humanity if the process of relaxation could be prolonged.

He was startled by a sound behind him, and turned to find Betty gently closing the door.

"Nothing happened?" she whispered, coming over to the bed.

"She stopped breathing once for about half a minute," Jacob confided to her in the same undertone. "I nearly rang for you."

"That often happens," Betty said. "But surely not half a minute?"

"It seemed a long time," replied Jacob.

"It's a quarter to eight," Betty went on, still whispering. "They're having dinner. You'd better go down and join them. I told Jane to lay a place for you."

Jacob shook his head. "I couldn't," he affirmed. "I'll go out if you don't want me any longer."

She looked at him with a slight perplexity, but made no attempt to dissuade him.

"It hasn't upset you, has it?" she asked anxiously, when they were in the hall downstairs.

"It made me think, that was all," Jacob said. He hesitated a moment, and then added: "Betty, why do we still speak of that body upstairs as 'she'? She's gone, you know—Mrs. Parmenter, I mean."

Betty's face expressed a question of Jacob's sanity.

"Oh, I'm all right," he assured her with a smile. "I'll explain to-morrow."

"You're sure it hasn't upset you?" persisted Betty.

"Not in the way you mean," he said.

5.

Betty arrived in Great Ormond Street at eight o'clock the next morning. She looked pale and tired. Jacob was shaving when she came in, and she joined him in the bedroom and sat down on the bed with a sigh of relief.

"It's all over," she announced.

Jacob stood before her with one side of his face covered with lather.

"What time?" he asked.

"Four o'clock this morning."

"She didn't recover consciousness, of course?"

Betty shook her head, and added as an afterthought: "Why 'of course'?"

"I knew she couldn't," Jacob said, with profound conviction.

"Didn't she make any sign?"

"She—she gurgled a little," Betty told him, "and just stopped breathing. That was all. We weren't sure at first."

"You were both there, then?"

"Freda fetched me just before the end. She thought it was nearly over."

"The machinery was running down," explained Jacob; "it had only been going on by a sort of inertia."

Betty looked puzzled, but she was too tired to ask any questions.

"I'll tell you sometime," Jacob said. "You're too done up for metaphysics just now."

"Yes; I think I'll have a cup of tea with you and then go to bed," replied Betty. "The undertaker is sending a woman in to do all that's necessary, so I needn't go back to-day. The funeral's to be on Saturday morning. Dr. Paramore said we oughtn't to put it off too long."

Jacob meditated, rubbing the dried lather on his unshaved cheek. That shell in the lace-trimmed night-dress had been fighting many enemies, he thought. How soon the body was invaded when the spirit had gone out of it.

"I wonder where she is now?" he said.

Betty smiled weakly. "Hadn't you better finish shaving?" she asked. "I'll get the breakfast."

"I'll do that," Jacob said eagerly. "It's practically all ready. I put the kettle and the egg-saucepan on before I started to shave."

"You finish dressing," replied Betty, getting up.

"Really, I'd sooner you'd let me . . ." began Jacob; but Betty had already gone into the other room to lay the cloth.

"I'll go to bed for a bit now, dear," she said, when they had had breakfast. "I must come down with you this afternoon."

"Down where?" asked Jacob.

"You surely haven't forgotten that you're going to see Norman Goodrich this afternoon!" exclaimed Betty. "Didn't you write?"

"I *had*—absolutely forgotten," Jacob said. "But I did write on Monday evening." He paused reflectively, and then put his hand into his jacket-pocket. "If you don't believe me, here's the letter," he added. "I forgot to post it."

"I don't know what you'd do without me," Betty said fondly. "You'd better go out at once and telephone."

"No good till ten o'clock," replied Jacob triumphantly. "They wouldn't be there. We're collaborators, you see," he explained. "It takes the two of us to get things quite right."

He reflected on that statement as he sat very quietly in the sitting-room later in the morning, trying to write a review while Betty slept. Betty had been right about many things with regard to Mrs. Parmenter's illness; he acknowledged that without qualification. But he had supplemented her intuitions, and perhaps he had, in a way, "got more out of that experience," as he phrased it, than Betty had.

"It has been rather tremendous, altogether," he thought. "Who would have imagined that Mrs. Parmenter, of all people, could have made me forget one of the most important engage-

ments in my life ? But it's experience that matters, not the writing about it."

He had a sense of achievement. He felt that he had acquired new and extraordinarily valuable knowledge.

"Experience, and what one gets out of it," he concluded.

It occurred to him, inappropriately, that "Dr. Paramore" would be a splendid name for a character in a novel.

XVI.

THE NEOPHYTE

I.

THE offices of Norman Goodrich were in Clement's Inn. The jamb of the outer door displayed the style of the firm in the same unobtrusive lettering that advertised the occupants of other chambers in the block, but added some little touch of importance by the information: "Ground and 1st." All the other floors were shared by at least two names, and the catalogue of the third-floor tenants made quite a respectable paragraph.

Jacob had left Betty at the entrance to the Inn. She was to meet him near the tea-shop in which they had celebrated the coming of Norman Goodrich's letter. That gloomy, rambling basement held no æsthetic or gastronomic attractions, but it was hallowed by their emotions. They had decided to use it on great occasions, and enrich it with the associations of Jacob's success.

"We don't *know* that they're going to take it yet," he had reminded Betty, when she had proposed the rendezvous.

"Of course they're going to take it," she had said contemptuously. "The only point is how much they're going to give you for it. And do try not to be too apologetic."

"They may be going to offer to publish it at my expense," Jacob had suggested.

"If they do, you'll bring the manuscript back with you," she had replied.

"All right. If you see me coming back with a parcel, you'll know," he had said.

"Don't you dare!" Betty had warned him.

And although he had enjoyed the spirit and encouragement of that altercation, now that he was at the door of the publishers' offices and already taking part, imaginatively, in the coming interview, he wished that he had not been handicapped by Betty's injunctions. If he had had no responsibility to consider, he could have approached this meeting with a careless, happy mind; instead of that he was burdened by the necessity for making terms.

He found a door on his left marked, "Office. Inquiries." He knocked, and then opened the door boldly and walked in. He was not a timid supplicant, as he had so often been in the past, but an almost accepted novelist. If he were going to carry this thing through in the proper spirit, he must remember the glory that haloed his visit.

A long counter shut him off from the littered spaces of the office into which he had come. A boy in an alpaca jacket looked up casually from his occupation of tying a parcel, and took no further notice of the visitor. But after Jacob had knocked not too imperiously on the counter, a young man with a pen between his teeth and a pencil behind his ear emerged from a stall in the corner, came across the room, and emitted an interrogatory grunt.

"I've an appointment with Mr. Goodrich for three o'clock," Jacob said defensively. "My name's Stahl."

The young man nodded without removing his gag, and returned to his box to gather up a pile of papers before making a leisurely exit from the office. He had not discovered any sign of being honoured by addressing a potential author.

The boy in alpaca was attacking another parcel with great circumspection.

Jacob felt that it was all painfully like his earlier experiences of looking for a job, and the associations depressed him. One point, however, he must stick to at any cost, he reflected: he dared not face Betty with any acknowledgment that he had consented to bear part of the cost of publication. He reminded himself stoically of her remark that there

were other publishers besides "bally Bill" and Norman Goodrich.

The young man was a long time away. No doubt the papers he had been carrying were typewritten letters that were being read and signed upstairs, while Jacob was kept waiting. He began to work himself up to a very creditable impatience. He reminded himself that he was not cadging for a job. "John Tristram" might be a rotten book, but that was no sort of reason for keeping him hanging about this beastly office!

He was quite determined to be immensely aloof and stern by the time the young man came down to say, "Will you come up?"

Even then his manner hardly expressed awe.

Jacob submissively followed him upstairs.

2.

The firm of Norman Goodrich was revealed as a tall, fair man of about Jacob's own age, and a younger partner who introduced himself as Goodrich, and immediately took over the preliminary formalities of opening a conversation.

He dismissed the weather with a brief reference, and then plunged into a discussion of Jacob's connection with the *Daily Post*, which had been mentioned as casually as possible—that had been Betty's suggestion—in his first letter.

"You've reviewed some of our books," said young Mr. Goodrich, with apparent eagerness; and when Jacob mentioned two of them, Mr. Goodrich remembered the reviews in question, and also that one of them had been quoted in certain of the firm's advertisements.

"Yes, I saw that you had quoted me," Jacob said, and followed the topic up by a brief reflection on the methods of quotation adopted by inferentially less scrupulous publishers, who did not hesitate so to hack a sentence from a review that the original intention was entirely misrepresented.

As a conversation the affair was going splendidly, but there had been no kind of reference yet to "John Tristram." Mr.

Goodrich might have been passing the time in a railway carriage for all the relation his remarks bore to the object of Jacob's visit.

And it was Jacob who, with a sympathetic thought of Betty waiting for him in the Strand, tactfully closed the preliminaries by lapsing into a monosyllabic commentary. Mr. Goodrich suddenly dried up; and then his partner, who had taken no hand in the criticism of advertising methods, looked up from a sheet of foolscap that he had been examining, and said:

"We like your book, Mr. Stahl."

"Good!" murmured Jacob, instantly abashed. It was only by summoning a vivid thought of Betty that he saved himself from launching out into an apology for his novel's manifest imperfections. By way of covering his confusion he went on quickly: "I don't know if the idea of running the story on into another book appeals to you at all? As a matter of fact, I didn't know what else to do, unless I rewrote the whole thing and cut out the best parts. I don't know if you agree with me, but I think the most interesting chapters in the book are those that are really least essential."

Mr. Norman passed that by. "We don't object to the idea of a sequel," he said, "if you will give us the option of publishing it."

"Oh yes, I should be delighted," mumbled Jacob, secretly swelling with pride at the thought that he was not only accepted but sought after. "Though, as a matter of fact," he went on, "the continuation of 'John Tristram' won't be my next novel. I have written nearly half of the next book. It's slightly fantastic, but really I think it's much better stuff than this one. I am rather keen on the book I'm doing now," he explained.

Mr. Norman smiled. "We should like to see that book too," he said.

Jacob felt like a small shopkeeper going into the wholesale. He had a vision of enormous productiveness that presented him in an entirely new rôle. "And as to 'John Tristram,'" he said, "I couldn't definitely pledge myself to finish him off

in one other volume. I think it quite likely that it will take me at least two more."

"We shouldn't mind a trilogy," Mr. Norman said, with a faintly whimsical glance at Jacob; "but I think it might be well to stop at three."

"Perhaps it would," Jacob agreed.

"There were just one or two suggestions . . ." Mr. Norman went on, looking down at his sheet of foolscap.

"Yes?" replied Jacob, bracing himself to receive criticism.

"We thought the epilogue a little too apologetic."

"I'll omit it, if you like," Jacob said, without hesitation.

Mr. Norman looked up with that rather enigmatical smile of his. Jacob had a sudden doubt whether he was not being altogether too ingenuous and plastic, and determined to be very firm when the question of terms was mooted.

"We should like to keep the epilogue," Mr. Norman said gravely. "But we thought one or two expressions could be out. They might be too tempting for reviewers."

"Oh yes, I understand. I hadn't thought of that, I'll admit," agreed Jacob.

"I've marked the passages," said Mr. Norman, particularising his own part in the performance for the first time.

"You've read it yourself?" asked Jacob.

"We all read it," replied Mr. Norman, leaving an impression of unguessed extensions in the firm.

The next sentence, however, added a necessary third to explain the suggestion of multitude. "Our reader queried one or two discrepancies," he said; and proceeded to enumerate them. They were not important, but Jacob was gravely distressed.

"Oh, good Lord, yes, that was an awful bloomer!" he admitted, getting very hot when it was pointed out to him that his hero had given up half a return ticket on coming back from a journey that had begun as a bus-ride. "I don't know how on earth I came to make a mistake like that," he said. "It's just the sort of thing I hate in a novel. I'm particularly keen on accuracy in details of that sort." He wanted to have the manuscript back at once and alter it. He had horrible

doubts as to whether he had not made other mistakes of the same kind.

"That's the only serious discrepancy," Mr. Norman gently advised him. "The other notes are of typist's errors, and I think you changed the name of one of your minor characters half-way through."

"I thought I'd altered that," expostulated Jacob.

"The old name has slipped in once or twice," said Mr. Norman. "We thought you might like to take the manuscript back with you and look it through again."

"Yes, certainly, I will," Jacob said. "Or perhaps you'd post it to me," he added, remembering that he must not let Betty see him coming with that parcel in his hand. "It's rather a lump to carry," he explained, "and I'm going on somewhere."

Mr. Norman nodded.

"By the way, when did you think of publishing the book?" asked Jacob, a little anxiously.

"We might get it out by the middle of January," replied Mr. Goodrich, suddenly taking a hand, but looking at his partner for confirmation.

Jacob had had a wild hope that it might be sooner, but he did not allow his disappointment to appear.

"It takes time, of course," he said.

"Christmas coming in between," explained Mr. Goodrich elliptically.

An awkward pause followed, and Jacob realised that at last the important topic was to be broached.

"About terms," began Mr. Norman bravely; and his partner nobly seconded the effort by adding:

"I'm afraid, as it's a first book, we should hardly be justified in making an advance."

"Oh no, of course not," agreed Jacob at once.

"But we could give you a royalty, beginning at, say, five per cent., and rising after the sale of the first five hundred copies," Mr. Norman appended.

Jacob made an effort. "Is that on the price you sell the book at?" he asked.

"Oh no; on the full published price of six shillings," Mr. Goodrich told him.

"Thirteen copies counting as twelve," supplemented his partner softly.

Jacob realised that, if he was going to justify his business training, the time for action had arrived, and must be seized before the opportunity slipped from him. "What would Farmer have done?" Jacob asked himself. Jacob could picture Farmer quite convincingly. He would have put his hands in his pockets, stuck out his fat little legs, screwed up the side of his mouth, shaken his head with great earnestness, and said: "Not good enough. Now, look here, I want . . ." And he would probably have got it.

Jacob sighed and stood up. "I suppose I couldn't expect more than that on a first novel," he said. "I haven't the least idea what sort of terms an author gets."

"The royalty would rise to fifteen per cent. after the sale of the first thousand copies," remarked young Mr. Goodrich hopefully.

"I'm sure it's perfectly all right," Jacob said. "We shall have some sort of an agreement, I suppose?"

"Oh yes, we shall have an agreement," replied Mr. Norman. He might have spoken in the same tone if Jacob had asked if the book was to be printed in English. He was quite grave, but he conveyed an impression of being faintly amused.

3.

Jacob found himself confronted with the necessity for giving Betty an illustrated, verbatim report when they were alone in their corner of the honoured basement. "What did they say to you? What were they like?" were her two questions.

Jacob would have preferred to produce a general impression of the interview by less precise methods, but he did his best.

"I suppose it's all right," was Betty's summary.

"I don't see that we could have expected more," said Jacob.

"I wish they could have published it before January," said Betty.

They hesitated for a time over a calculation of how much they might make if "John Tristram" sold one, five, or, with an ambitious leap, twenty thousand copies. Jacob conscientiously pointed out the absurdity of the last estimate, but Betty could see nothing outrageous in it, and clamoured for figures.

"About eight hundred pounds, I think," was Jacob's calculation; and then he proceeded to arrive at a more precise estimate with the aid of a pencil, a little worried by the intricacies of "thirteen as twelve," a trade convention of discount that he already knew by repute.

They had frankly surrendered themselves to exultation before they had finished tea.

"In a way, you know," Jacob said, with a thought for the future, "we shan't touch this level again. It seems ridiculous now, but the time will come when we shan't even get excited when we see a novel of mine in print."

"Aren't you dying to get the proofs?" interrupted Betty.

"Rather. I can't imagine quite what it will look like. It doesn't seem possible that it will look just like an ordinary novel. But it will, of course, and we shall get used to it, and, as I said, we shall probably never get quite as much excitement and . . . and sense of achievement out of any other success as we are getting now."

He wanted, indeed, to hold the thought of his achievement very clearly and very persistently—to realise his present success in relation to all his past life. He became autobiographical, and gave Betty a sketch of his less literary past, and of his constant and, as it seemed, futile, desire to write a novel. "Not a great or even a successful novel," he said, "but just a novel of reasonable attainment that would be received with a certain amount of attention."

Betty thought he would do better than that, but he preferred to enjoy the satisfaction of what he regarded as the substantial fact rather than to indulge in gloriously impossible dreams.

"I feel as if I should like to talk to all the people I used to know," he announced; "or, rather, I should like them all to see a decently favourable notice of the book when it appears."

"I expect no end of people will be wanting to know you again," said Betty, with a fine shade of doubt clouding her happiness.

Jacob pushed the suggestion aside. "One or two, possibly," he thought; and so came to face the probability that one person would almost certainly write to him.

"My brother, for example," he said.

"I never can remember that you have a brother," Betty said. "Tell me about him. Did you quarrel? Why have you never written to him?"

"I don't know," returned Jacob. "We've never actually quarrelled, but we've never been friends. He's so confoundedly clever. He's just exactly everything I'm not—tremendously well read, and sound, and accurate, and painstaking."

"Why didn't you get on together?" Betty asked.

"Well, he's older than I am," Jacob explained; "and he's always been a success. My father left most of his money to me, because he knew I was handicapped; and Eric made his own way—he's in the Home Civil—and got on, and I lost the money I had, and failed at everything."

Betty took his hand under the table. "You haven't failed now," she said.

"No, darling; but I should have, without you," he said. "But, as a matter of fact, my success won't count for much with Eric. He'll criticise me, very justly, but very hardly, because he'll judge me by a standard that's obviously too high for me."

"What would he say about us?" Betty asked.

"Lord knows!" returned Jacob. "He isn't a bit pious; he doesn't believe in your religion, and that sort of thing, but he'll probably think it was inexpedient or something. And then, of course, he's always been very respectable, even though he wouldn't admit it."

"He's married, isn't he?" asked Betty; and then: "What's his wife like?"

"She's nice, rather. They had a baby that died—they may have another by this time—and I got to know her rather well then. I could make her understand about you, I think."

"I wonder," was all Betty's comment.

"I don't know why we should spoil our entertainment by talking about Eric and his wife," Jacob went on, conscious of the note of depression that had come into Betty's voice. "I'm certainly not going to write to them unless they write to me."

"They will," asserted Betty.

Jacob shrugged his shoulders.

"I can't quite understand now," she persisted, "why you dropped them so completely."

Jacob thought for a moment before he said: "Just me, I suppose. I always put off writing to them. It was another case of those boots at Trevarrian."

4.

"I suppose we'd better be going," remarked Betty presently.

"Where to? We can't go home—to-night," expostulated Jacob.

Betty hesitated. "What else can we do?" she asked.

"Let's go to the Palace," suggested Jacob. "You've never been there. Surely we can go a little buster to-night?"

"I was thinking of Mrs. Parmenter," Betty said.

Jacob had forgotten that lady completely during the past three hours, but at the mention of her name, he was plunged back into the experiences of the three days that had intervened between his receipt of Norman Goodrich's letter and his present state of ecstasie success. The experience had been assimilated, and had apparently had no effect upon him. He remembered his musings in that ghastly room at Montague

Place, as the well-intentioned might remember the fervour of some old vow.

"Does that matter?" he asked.

Betty knitted her forehead. "It seems rather heartless," she said.

"It isn't as though we should be doing her any sort of good by going home," argued Jacob. "And we can hardly pretend that we're particularly cast down and bereaved by our loss."

"I know," Betty admitted. "It isn't that."

"Can you tell me what it is?"

"It's just the way one feels about it."

"But you don't feel like that about it, really." He was ready to warm up to an attack upon the general convention, when he remembered that only yesterday he had had to admit the fault of his logic from similar premisses. He broke off abruptly.

"I wonder if there is anything in it," he said in another tone.

Betty looked quickly up at him. "I expect it's only a superstition," she said. "I don't mind. Let's go."

"We won't if you'd sooner not," he said earnestly. "I don't know that I'm frightfully keen."

They hung on that for a moment, and then Jacob said: "I was quite wrong yesterday—about watching her, you know. I may be wrong about this too. Only, do you honestly feel that we ought not to go—that there is anything 'heartless' in our going? If we were Catholics, and ought to be devoting the time to praying for her soul, it would be rather different, although that can be managed, I believe, at quite small expense. . . ."

She did not allow him to frame the alternative. "I don't," she said. "It's only superstition. Come on."

Jacob pondered her decision as they walked up towards Charing Cross, and presently came out with his explanation of the difference between her attitudes of to-day and yesterday.

"I think you're generally right when it's a question of practical conduct," he said, having framed his statement

carefully in his mind, "even though you seem to be guided by old superstitions; but when you come to what is really a theoretical point, like this going to a music-hall to-night, or"—he looked at her whimsically—"the question of our being married, then, I think, you're just as likely to be wrong as right. Your intuition does not help you."

Betty smiled. "I dare say not," she said.

5.

Jacob found the re-reading and correction of his manuscript a tedious and distasteful labour. His sentences were becoming wearisomely familiar, and the remembrance that within a few weeks he would see them perpetuated in type, filled him with terrified apprehension. And yet he could not bring himself to make any drastic alterations to his story. It was all stale to him, and although he might criticise it still in a kind of hopeless despair, he had not a word to add to it, not a single inspiration for an alternative treatment of the episodes he chiefly condemned. Moreover, his inertia compelled him to regard these typewritten pages as in some way a finished and unalterable product. He felt that if he once began any attempt at rewriting, he would have no choice but to begin the whole story again in another manner, preferably that in which he was treating his next book. His first essay in fiction already appeared to him as something he had wonderfully outgrown. He consoled himself with the thought that his next book would be infinitely better.

Betty seemed to fail him in this crisis. She would not lend a sympathetic ear to his perfectly sincere condemnation of "John Tristram." Jacob believed that if he could speak out all his thoughts concerning what he regarded as the amateurishness and general incompetence displayed in his first novel, he might work off his chagrin and perhaps suffer a reaction. But Betty manifested signs of impatience whenever he began to unload the masses of adverse criticism he accumulated during his reading of the manuscript. "You can't judge it now," she said. "You're tired of it."

"I've half a mind not to publish it," Jacob once desperately ventured, when she refused to hear his strictures of the maligned book. He was not quite in earnest. He wanted chiefly to convince her that he was perfectly sincere in his attitude of depreciation, and to prepare her in some sort for the book's reception; but she took him at his word.

"I don't know what you think is going to become of us," she said, "if you never publish any of the books you write."

He reassured her on that occasion, but he remembered the essential complaint implied when an apparently unrelated topic came up for discussion the next day.

Betty produced her suggestion with an evident hesitation, some three or four days after Mrs. Parmenter's funeral.

"I suppose you wouldn't like to do this?" she began, apropos of nothing in particular.

"I dare say I should," Jacob said, smiling. "What is it?"

Betty frowned, and looked up at him doubtfully. "I don't think Freda will be able to keep on the boarding-house—alone," she ventured.

Jacob instantly guessed her project, but he preferred to shirk the unpleasant issue as long as possible.

"Why doesn't she go back to the stage?" he asked. "I've always thought that keeping a boarding-house was quite out of her line. It's a rotten job for anyone."

"She can't get any engagements," Betty said. "She tried tremendously hard before she came to Montague Place, and, as she says, if it was difficult then, it will be ever so much harder now."

"Hasn't she got any people?" prevaricated Jacob. "What's her father doing? He used to be pretty prosperous."

"She wouldn't go to him," replied Betty firmly. She knew quite certainly that Jacob had anticipated her suggestion, and was bitterly averse to it, but she meant at least to present its more salient advantages.

"Besides, she doesn't want to leave Montague Place," she went on with determination. "And I do think you might *discuss* my suggestion. We haven't *settled* anything."

"I haven't heard what it is yet," remonstrated Jacob.

She overlooked that feeble dissimulation. "We should save a lot of money," she said. "You could have a room all to yourself, and it would give me something to do."

Jacob chose to select the first of her inducements as the most easily controvertible. "We aren't so terribly hard up as all that," he said pettishly; and then remembered her complaint of the day before. "You haven't any real faith in me, you see," he protested. "Really, I don't think I've done so badly. We are getting nearly two-fifty a year out of the *Daily Post*, and I suppose I'm bound to make something out of 'John Tristram,' and 'The Creature' will be finished in another month or two. But I suppose you think 'Tristram' will be an awful frost? You don't think I shall ever make enough money to keep us."

"It's only just now," Betty tried to assure him. "I know you will make heaps of money. But until your books become known . . ."

"You think 'Tristram' will be a failure, then?" he put in.

"I don't; but you won't get anything out of it for months and months. You said so yourself."

"But we've plenty to go on with till we do get something out of it. I've still got over fifty pounds in the bank."

"Why do you object to the idea of our going to Montague Place?" asked Betty, with a determined reversion to essentials.

"I loathe the place," Jacob said with decision, "and I loathe the idea of your cooking and housekeeping for a lot of rotten German boarders."

"If I don't mind it . . ." began Betty.

"You used to hate it," he retorted.

"Not till you came."

"I should still be there."

"It would be quite different now."

"I don't see why it should," he said.

"I want an occupation," she returned. "You won't consider that."

"Are you so tired of being with me?"

"You can't understand," was Betty's hopeless comment.

"I do, I do," Jacob asserted. "I know it's often very deadly for you in rooms like this, but this sort of thing isn't going on. I'm doing my best to make money. I'm a helpless sort of ass, I know, in many ways, but I believe, if I have a fair chance, that I shall be able to make a decent living by writing. You've always encouraged me to believe so, anyway. Why have you suddenly changed your mind?"

"I haven't," Betty said.

"Well, then, can't you endure this for a few months longer?" he asked.

They were nearer a quarrel at that moment than they had ever been, and Jacob, in the middle of his argument, was suddenly dismayed to realise the bitterness of his tone. He stopped abruptly, but he could not immediately recover his equanimity. His mind still ran on like a machine, presenting all the injustices of Betty's proposals, her lack of faith in him, her willingness to take him back to a place he hated, her failure to understand that distraction from little worries was absolutely necessary to him if he was to put his best work into the novel he was writing.

He stood by the mantelpiece, making a great effort to control his irritation, and to check that mechanical unrolling of his case against Betty and her proposal.

Betty, in the armchair, had taken up her work—she was knitting a pair of socks for him—and looked down, resolutely silent, at her clicking needles.

"Betty darling, I'm sorry," Jacob said, after a pause. "I'm quite reasonable now. I won't be peevish again."

Betty finished a row and withdrew a needle, then she looked up at him and said:

"Would you like to go back to Cornwall?"

He could not adjust himself at once to her new attitude. "Is that an alternative?" he asked.

Betty looked down at the oblong padded cushion that decorated the arm of her chair, and began to stab it with her free knitting-needle.

"I don't think I should mind so much out of London," she said.

"Do you mean that you're . . . worrying . . . about us again?" asked Jacob.

"Not exactly," Betty said, gently forcing her needle into the padding with a little click and then withdrawing it again. "But I do want an occupation. When I'm by myself I can't help thinking about things. I'm not worrying exactly, not in the same way; but I get depressed with nothing to do, and then everything seems wrong."

"I suppose it wouldn't be possible for you to help to run the boarding-house from here?" Jacob suggested.

"I hate to feel that you're here alone, with no one to look after you," replied Betty; and then she looked up with a smile and added: "Besides, I thought you hated the idea of my working there."

"So I do," replied Jacob, with decision. "I hate it, but I want to do what's best for you."

"I don't believe you'd find it so disagreeable at Montague Place," Betty said, "if we had a sitting-room to ourselves."

Jacob reflected for a moment before he said quietly: "No, I won't go back there, dear. I've got a more capable imagination than you in many ways. I can picture the facts coldly, and, I think, accurately; you always colour them one way or the other to suit your mood."

Betty had returned to her knitting. "Well?" she encouraged him.

"At Montague Place I should have to mix with the boarders at meal-times, certainly, and almost certainly you would want me to go down in the evenings and at other times as well. You might begin by saying you wouldn't, but we should soon slip into that. And, apart altogether from its being a beastly, ambiguous position to put me into, I can't afford to spend myself in little worries and irritations of that sort. This writing business is a funny game, dear. I've only realised it myself in the last few months. I dare say many men and more women can just take it up, work for so many hours a day, and live any sort of life for the rest of the time. I can't. I suppose it's an admission of weakness, but my mind seems to tire so quickly. I take a lot out of

myself when I'm trying to write—even reviews—and if I don't get a certain amount of ease and comfort and happiness in between times, what little capacity I have, goes. I've no ideas, you see; I haven't the blessed ability of great men, the power to shut off my mind into compartments, to put down one idea, forget it temporarily, and take up another. If I'd had that sort of mind, we shouldn't have been here now. You've got to understand, darling, that you've taken over a rather poor sort of fool, who's got to be humoured in odd ways if he's ever going to make a decent living out of writing novels. Do you regret it?"

Betty put down her knitting and held out her arms to him. "I'm sorry, darling; I won't be silly any more," she said. "I *do* understand, really; and I know you're going to do wonderful things."

He went and knelt by her chair. "Not wonderful," he said.

"You are," she insisted.

"Do you realise that we were very near quarrelling?" he asked her a few minutes later.

But Betty denied that they had even been within sight of a real quarrel.

They agreed that they might go down to Cornwall after "John Tristram" was published. As Jacob explained, the weekly meeting at the *Daily Post* offices had become a pure formality. Mr. Gresswell gave instructions, and the reviewers agreed. And so far as he himself was concerned, the instructions might equally well be given on a slip of paper.

XVII.

REINSTATEMENT

1.

THEIR second Christmas Day together was not quite as neglected as the first had been. Mrs. Lynneker wrote to Betty and sent her a cheque for five pounds—"to get anything you may want, dear"—and save for a short note on the peculiar spiritual opportunities provided at that season, she made no reference to her niece's moral obliquities. Also Hilda wrote from her Rectory fastness a somewhat effusive letter, explaining her long silence by the fact that she was expecting "an event early in January," and reminding Betty that she had never written or even sent her address, which had been obtained at last from Aunt Mary.

Jacob was inclined to be optimistic on the strength of these acknowledgments. He never lost an opportunity of reassuring Betty as to the rectitude of their position, and found a text on the occasion more especially in Hilda's letter. He claimed that Mrs. Lynneker had already been won.

Betty smiled incredulously. "I would sooner Hilda left it alone than go half-way like this," she said.

"Why? What more could you expect?" asked Jacob.

"You don't think it's the sort of letter she would have written if—if—well, if we had been married, do you?" replied Betty. "There's no hint of my going to see her, for instance."

"I think that's comprehensible enough," Jacob said. "I've never pretended that the sort of people she mixes with haven't a perfectly logical prejudice against people like us. She

couldn't very well ask you down there, and she knows you wouldn't come if she did; but evidently she herself has got nothing against you now. She wants to be nice to you."

Betty looked down at the letter. "It's Christmas-time," she said quietly, "and poor old Hilda is very likely wondering just now whether she'll ever see another. I can understand that she wanted to make her peace with me."

Jacob thought Betty was a little bitter. "Shan't you write to her?" he asked.

"Of course I shall write!" she said, with a flash of astonishment at his lack of comprehension.

Jacob gave up that problem as beyond his powers. "Are you still unhappy about it sometimes?" he said.

"Well, naturally," she returned, without embarrassment.

"I mean, do you worry?" he insisted.

"In a way I do."

Jacob reflected for a moment, and then said: "Yes, but it's an extraordinarily different way."

"I suppose it is," she admitted. "I've got used to the idea, perhaps; and Freda and I often talk about it."

"She's a good sort," Jacob said; and then the topic that had once been of such overwhelming importance was diverted to a discussion of Freda and her boarding-house. She was coming to dinner with them the next evening. Christmas Day was on a Sunday that year.

Mrs. Parmenter had made a will on one of her death-beds, and had left all her possessions, including the furniture of Montague Place and her balance at the bank, to Freda, for whom the old lady had evidenced a decided affection during her illness. No mention had been made of Betty's investment of capital, and when Jacob had first heard of this testament some three weeks after Mrs. Parmenter's death, he had been inclined to resent that omission. But Betty had overruled him. Freda knew nothing whatever about it, she had explained, and implied that she was never to know. Jacob had thought the silence even more generous than the gift.

The whole affair had been quite informal. The will had never been proved.

And now Freda had had an offer of two hundred and fifty pounds for the furniture and goodwill of the house in Montague Place, the goodwill including some six or seven actual boarders, apparently satisfied with their present condition. The capitalist was the Mrs. Letchworth, the proprietress of the "little place in St. John's Wood," who had once sought a partnership with Mrs. Parmenter, and had been refused as lacking in gentility.

Jacob was in favour of accepting the offer. Nothing more had been said of Betty's proposal to join forces with Freda, but he felt that it would be a relief when the scheme was no longer practicable. And as a companion Freda would be more available than ever, for Mrs. Letchworth was not too generously supplied with available capital, and fifty pounds of the purchase money was to be paid in kind. Freda was to have board and lodging—Jacob's old bedroom—for twelve months in lieu of cash. She was quite confident that, with a year's leisure and a capital of two hundred pounds, she would be able to find work.

"I have been lucky, haven't I?" she said, when they discussed the offer after dinner on Christmas night.

"You deserved it," Betty said.

Jacob echoed the compliment half-heartedly. He was thinking that Freda's luck was all of Betty's bringing, and that some of it represented a solid gift of money.

He could not keep that thought to himself when Freda had gone.

"She would have done the same for me," was Betty's answer. "In fact she did, practically. When we first talked over the idea of my working with her in Montague Place, she insisted that I should go half-shares with her, although I was bringing nothing into the business. Besides, poor Freda hasn't been half as lucky as I have," she concluded, and so successfully turned the conversation.

Jacob reflected that women's method of doing business was hardly one that would be approved by the lawyers. And Mrs. Letchworth had not made any inquiries as to Freda's title to the furniture. It was certainly a risky method in a civili-

sation so dominated by the legal profession; but how admirable and economically the system worked, founded, as it was, on a basis of confidence and generosity!

2.

"John Tristram" was published on the nineteenth of January.

Jacob had expended a guinea on a subscription to a press-cutting agency, but he modestly explained to Betty that it would be no good expecting reviews for at least ten days after publication. "It's only novels by well-known writers that get noticed at once," he told her. He counted the *Daily Post*, however, as a possible exception.

The advance copy of "John Tristram" had been among the books in the office on the previous Monday afternoon. There had been few books to send out that day—publishers were presumably still waiting for the final dissipation of holiday conditions—and when only fiction, represented by five novels, remained to be dealt with, Mr. Gresswell swept them together with a casual glance, and, turning to Jacob, said: "I don't know whether you would care to look through these and see if any of them are worth a notice."

Jacob blushed. "Oh yes," he stammered at last; "four of them I might. I don't think I'm quite the proper person to do the other."

Mr. Gresswell looked slightly puzzled and annoyed. "Why not?" he asked, and looked down at the title of the books on the table.

Jacob felt that he was making the occasion altogether too important. The one other reviewer who had come to the office that day was looking at him quizzically. "I wrote it," Jacob blurted out. "A first effort."

Mr. Gresswell had spotted "John Tristram" at last. "Oh, I see—yes," he said, apparently quite as much embarrassed at the moment as the author. Then he smiled in his kindly way, and added: "The other four, at least. . . ."

Jacob had seen his first effort laid on the editorial table.

"I hope to goodness he isn't going to do it himself," he said, when he reported the episode to Betty.

"Oh, why not?" she asked. "I expect he is. He's sure to be kind to you."

Jacob's face expressed doubt. "It makes me hot all over to think of his reading it," he said. "And as to being kind, he won't if he doesn't think the book deserves it. I don't suppose there's another daily in London as free from favouritism or log-rolling as the *D. P.* Gresswell's awfully down on that sort of thing."

"I'm perfectly certain he'll like it," Betty said confidently, and went on to ask questions as to "Tristram's" appearance in book-form. They had not then received their presentation copies, and the paged proofs, although they had lent a new dignity and an air of orthodoxy to the story, had not fulfilled the expectation of the completed book.

"Amazingly like an ordinary novel," Jacob said. "As a matter of fact, I haven't had it in my hand yet."

They were both of them enormously excited.

3.

Thursday and Saturday were the days on which the *Daily Post* devoted its second page to literature; and Jacob, protesting that his novel would most certainly not be reviewed on the day of publication, nevertheless opened his paper on Thursday morning with evident trepidation.

"No, it isn't in; I didn't expect it would be," he said, in answer to the question of Betty's eager face. "There's a column and a half of my stuff, though, which isn't so bad for a Thursday. They're working off all the old stuff I did before Christmas."

But on Saturday morning Betty went down to the front-door in her dressing-gown, when she heard the casual thump of the newsboy at half-past seven.

Jacob sat up in bed and listened for the sound of her return. She was, he thought, an outrageously long time in the hall. But when he heard her begin to run up the stairs, he knew

that she had good news. He jumped out of bed and met her on the landing.

"It's in !" she said breathlessly. "A long notice. More than half a column."

Jacob took the paper she offered him, and began to read the review on the landing. Betty led him into the bedroom still reading.

"Oh, read it aloud !" she implored. "I hardly glanced at it downstairs."

Jacob ran his eye quickly over the essentials of the criticism that would be contained, as he knew, in the concluding sentences.

"It isn't bad," he announced.

"Well, read it to me," she insisted.

"Oh, not bad !" she said, when he had finished. "I think it's splendid !"

"He takes me tremendously seriously," remarked Jacob, with an uneasy smile. "All this criticism about the relative values I've given to the characters, for instance, and the mistake of making all the others too subsidiary to Tristram. It's perfectly sound, no doubt, but it's taking too high a standard."

"Well, that's a compliment, isn't it ?" asked Betty.

"It's a compliment all right," returned Jacob; "but it isn't the sort of thing that's going to make people want to read the book. It sounds too classical and artistic, and all that sort of thing. If he could have said something about the interest and humanity of it. . . ."

"You're never satisfied," Betty complained. "I should have thought you would have been tremendously pleased. It's a pretty good beginning, surely—more than half a column of serious criticism in the *Daily Post* two days after publication. Oh, I know it's going to be a huge success."

"I wonder," remarked Jacob, and suddenly realised that he was shivering with cold and excitement. "It's a bit chilly this morning, isn't it ?" he said.

Even Betty had been too much engrossed to scold him for

standing about in his pyjamas on a January morning. "Get back into bed, for goodness' sake!" she adjured him.

"Not much," replied Jacob. "I'll put on my dressing-gown, and do the sitting-room grate and light the fire."

She found him there a quarter of an hour later, his housework completed, and re-reading Mr. Gresswell's review.

"He calls it 'a first novel of exceptional promise,'" he said, as she came in. "That will make a good quote for the publishers' advertisements, but it's the only bally one."

During breakfast, he hopefully pointed out to Betty that, although the seriously critical tone of the editor's review might not intrigue the interest of the novel-reading public, it would be seen by other reviewers, and obtain for "John Tristram" more attention than he might otherwise have received. Betty saw that that was a good point, and he amplified it with much tautology.

She found a delightful method of teasing him that morning. "Who's a brilliant novelist?" she asked, and forced him, in spite of his perfectly genuine reluctance, to name himself. "I don't suppose I shall get any work out of you to-day," she said, when she had wrung the shamefaced admission from him, notwithstanding the many elaborate arguments that he had adduced to prove to her that this first book was a most commonplace performance.

"You're quite wrong there, dear," he said triumphantly. "I'm simply full of ideas and energy now. It's when I'm up against it that I can't work."

And he justified his statement by an enthusiastic attack on his new book, as soon as the breakfast-table had been cleared.

She found him apparently absorbed when she came into their sitting-room at eleven o'clock.

"I'm going to take the review round to Freda," she announced; "and I'm going to send a copy to Hilda and Aunt Mary. Do you want one sent to your brother?"

Jacob considered the question for a moment, and decided against it. "He's sure to see it," he said. "I'd sooner the first advance came from him."

When Betty had gone, he sat happily idle for some minutes,

contemplating the amazing fact that he was, in a sense, a success.

"I'm bound to get attention with this next book," he thought.

4.

His anticipations as to the influence of Mr. Gresswell's notice were justified by the event. The press did not boom "John Tristram," but they gave it reasonable attention. There were some notable exceptions. *The Times* and the *Daily Telegraph* overlooked him altogether, but the majority of the London dailies treated him with a slightly doubting respect, implying that he had done rather well as far as they could judge, but that they would prefer to wait for further samples before definitely committing themselves.

The *Morning Post* critic displayed a greater confidence in his own opinion than any other writer, and the arrival of the press-cutting, a fortnight after the book's publication, was one of the "events" that marked this period.

Jacob read the notice aloud to Betty, and afterwards re-read the more glowing passages, such as "Mr. Stahl has written a very remarkable book. If, as it seems, it is his first, 'John Tristram' should place its writer at once in the forefront of modern novelists"; and the conclusion, in which the reviewer congratulated him "on one of the most convincing studies of character we have read for a very long time."

"No hesitation about that," Jacob commented, flushed with quiet pride.

"He hasn't said a word too much," Betty assured him; and then they read the notice all through again, in order to get the feeling of the general tone of it.

"He's really enthusiastic, isn't he?" Jacob asked gleefully.

Betty jumped out of her chair and kissed him. "Now, who's a brilliant novelist?" she asked, and would not be put off by any of his attempted evasions.

And it was the *Morning Post* review that produced the expected communication from Jacob's brother, Eric.

Jacob found the letter in the passage when he returned from the *Daily Post* office on Monday evening. Betty had gone to tea with Freda, and he guessed that she had not yet returned. She would certainly have taken the letter upstairs if she had come in. For one moment his jealousy of Freda flared up again. He was hurt that Betty should not have been at home to welcome him.

He found a carefully banked-up fire in their sitting-room, stirred it into a blaze, and sat down to read his letter. It was not long.

“MY DEAR JAMES,

“I saw an excellent review of your novel, ‘John Tristram,’ in the *Morning Post* on Thursday, and congratulate you on what seems to be an undoubted achievement. I have not read the book yet, but I shall certainly do so next week. Why have you never come to see us? It must be more than two years now since we last heard from you, and I am addressing this to the care of your publishers, as I have not the least notion where you are living. We, as you see, are still in the same house, and would be delighted if you would come to supper any Sunday.

“Your affectionate brother,

“ERIC.”

“P.S.—Doris begs me to add that she hopes we shall see you next Sunday, if you are in town.”

“Not only still in the same house,” reflected Jacob, “but also in precisely the same mood.” In two years his brother had not changed in the least degree, if his letter was any criterion. It might have been written two or ten years before, and in those two years Jacob had had experiences that had revolutionised his whole attitude towards life. “I am not the same man,” he thought, “that I was in those days.” Yet he was conscious at that moment of all the old hesitations and doubts. He would never be able to boast, nor even to defend his own opinions, in his brother’s house at Putney. That old form of address—no one but Eric had

ever called him "James"—seemed to have some hypnotic suggestion. The sight of his brother and the sense of the familiar atmosphere of his surroundings would be still more potent. Jacob could picture every detail of his visit, and, just as on an earlier occasion, he would have to tell what must appear in those surroundings as a disreputable story. He had almost decided that nothing should induce him to go to Putney when he heard the front-door slam, and then Betty's footstep on the stairs.

She came in, a little flushed, as if she had been hurrying.

"Oh, you are in first, after all!" she said. "Any news?"

Jacob had quite forgotten his resentment. "The long-expected letter from Eric," he said, and gave it to her to read.

"What a wonderful handwriting!" was her first exclamation. "It's so extraordinarily neat, and small, and clear."

Jacob wondered vaguely whether the same adjectives were in any way descriptive of Eric's soul, but he said nothing till Betty had finished.

"Are you going?" she asked, looking at him with an expression he could not interpret. He thought it a little cold—defensive, perhaps.

"Oh no! What's the good?" he said. "As a matter of fact I've been, in imagination. I know so absolutely everything they would say."

"I think you'd better go," replied Betty.

"What good would it do?" he said; but he was suddenly aware that he wanted to go. That visit would be an adventure, an excitement. It would give him an opportunity to make one more effort to express himself to his brother. Jacob felt that in some inexplicable way he might make himself understood, if he were only bold enough.

"Well, he is your brother," Betty said. "And evidently his wife would like to see you."

"I don't really care one way or the other," remarked Jacob carelessly.

"You would tell them about us, of course?" Betty continued.

"Obviously. I'm not the least ashamed of our relations," Jacob returned valiantly.

"But you wouldn't take me with you?"

"Rather! I would, if you'd like to come. It would be no end of a lark."

"And suppose they snubbed me?"

"Make a few pertinent remarks and walk out," Jacob suggested.

Betty smiled. "I wouldn't go for anything in the world," she announced.

Jacob was puzzled. "Would you sooner I didn't go, either?" he asked.

"I want you to go, but I don't think you'd better say anything about me," was her answer.

"I couldn't go and not mention you," he said firmly.

"What good can it do?" she said. "Why not go and talk about your book and leave me out of it?"

He frowned and took up his old question: "Are you worrying again?"

"Not a bit," she said gaily. "I was talking to Freda about that this afternoon. That was what made me late. I only want to be consistent about it. You see, dear, there are evidently two sorts of people from our point of view—the ones who won't care about our not being married, and the ones who will. I don't know which sort your brother belongs to, but I can guess; and it isn't any good trying to persuade that sort that we are just as virtuous as they are, because you couldn't ever make them believe it. So what we've got to do is to know only the other sort."

"There are plenty of the other sort about," replied Jacob, "and we're pretty sure to meet them when I'm a bit better known; but does all this mean that you'd sooner I didn't go to Putney?"

"No; I want you to go," Betty said. "But I do think that you'd better leave me out of it."

"I couldn't do that," Jacob repeated.

They decided finally that he was to accept Eric's invitation for the next Sunday, not mentioning Betty in his letter, but

leaving himself free to make any announcement he thought fit when the time came.

Reflecting on the conversation later, Jacob was struck by the change that had come over Betty in the last fifteen months. She held her head higher now than he held his own. Was that change mainly due to Freda's influence, he wondered ?

5.

As he walked up from Putney Station to his brother's house on Sunday evening, Jacob was fully prepared to adopt a confident, high-handed attitude throughout the coming interview. He had a clear way of escape. If he returned to Betty that night with the admission that he had not mentioned her name, she could not blame him. She had steadfastly advised silence, and defended her advice on the grounds that Mr. and Mrs. Eric Stahl fell into the category of the "other sort." Jacob believed that also, but he did not believe that he would be well advised to leave Putney with the one important fact of his relations with Betty unreported. His silence might be diplomatic, but it would constitute an admission that he was ashamed, with the further implication that many of his old arguments were fallacious. Nevertheless, he had left himself a way of escape for two reasons. The first was that he wanted to surprise Betty. He had left her without declaring his intention. He liked to think that she was at that moment anticipating his failure to confess their relations, and he pictured with a keen pleasure his return with the quiet boast that he had always meant to be perfectly honest and brave about it all. He would justify himself, and give her fresh cause for confidence. His second reason was equally characteristic. He felt relieved by the knowledge that he was not pledged. That knowledge gave him strength. He hated to be in any sense driven. Now he was free to do as he chose.

And in the train he argued himself into a pose of smiling superiority to any strictures or cold disapproval that he might, and as he thought probably would, meet. He was self-sufficient. He was in no way dependent upon his brother's

good-will. He had, with Betty's assistance, made some sort of a place for himself in the world. He was a regular and esteemed contributor to one of the most literary dailies in London. He had written a book that placed him, according to the *Morning Post's* reviewer, "in the forefront of modern novelists." Finally, in this connection, he had nearly finished a second book that in his own opinion was far better than the first. He must, he reflected, keep the thought of his own glory constantly in his mind. He must walk into his brother's house with the consciousness and the air of the brilliant young novelist who was one day going to do great things. . . .

As he walked up from the station he was fully persuaded that he was a person of considerable consequence.

It was the sight of that familiar place that gave him the first feeling of uneasiness. Eric's house stood slightly apart from its neighbours, its grounds were larger, and both house and garden were neater and in some way more definite than those near them. Here were the marks of efficiency and permanence. Jacob halted with his hand on the latch of the garden-gate and wondered if George Eliot could have defended her position in those surroundings ?

And then he had to wait alone for five minutes in the drawing-room. Mr. and Mrs. Stahl were out, the maid said, but would certainly be back in a few minutes. They had gone to Hampstead—a long journey from Putney in 1899.

Jacob fidgetted, and his courage sank continually lower as he sat in his brother's drawing-room. There, too, he found the characteristic marks. The furniture was neither Victorian nor influenced by the craze for the antique. Beautifully kept mahogany and walnut, silver and brass, proclaimed a note of stability without pretentiousness, and the many books which had overflowed from the library were so undeniably well chosen. The best literature was represented, and yet the choice was not from the more obvious classics. Stendhal, Sainte-Beuve, Flaubert, and Bourget were there in the originals, together with French translations from Pushkin, Gorky, and Turgenev. Germany supplied no lighter literature except Heine's verse, but there was a German transla-

tion of a Swedish writer named August Strindberg, almost unknown in England at that time. . . .

Jacob ranged moodily along the shelves, growing continually more conscious of his ignorance and the futility of his attempt at fiction. This was the standard by which he would be judged. Eric and his wife had read these books, and knew them well enough to compare and criticise the writers of them. The whole atmosphere of the place was impregnable. Scholarship and efficiency made up the dominant note of the house. And even in the most conventional details the owners of it maintained their standard. No doubt that Hampstead visit had been a duty call, the kind of visit that Jacob, in Eric's position, would have shirked and neglected.

He was roused from his reflections by the sound of the garden-gate. They were coming, and Jacob knew that he was a hopeless failure, and not at all respectable.

6.

Doris came in at once. "Oh, you are here!" she said. "I'm sorry we were out. We have been over to Professor Henderson's at Hampstead, and it is such a journey." She appeared to be slightly embarrassed.

"I've only been here a few minutes," Jacob said. "I've been looking at the books." He was ready to plunge headlong into that subject when his brother entered.

Eric Stahl was slightly shorter than Jacob, and had a scholarly stoop of the shoulders that made him look shorter still. He had dark eyes, a neat, dark moustache, and somewhat blunt features, that contrasted markedly with Jacob's blue-eyed, clean-shaven, rather ascetic face, and yet some effect of general proportion or trick of expression emphasised a recognisable likeness between them. No one could doubt that they were brothers.

"I'm sorry we're late," Eric said, as he shook hands with his brother. "We've been over to Henderson's at Hampstead. It's a tremendous undertaking."

"I've only been here a minute or two," Jacob said; and

then Doris got up with a smile and murmured that she must go and take off her things.

Jacob wondered how many more times it would be necessary to begin a conversation. Presently Doris would return, and after that they would go in to supper. Each interruption necessitated a fresh opening. At that moment he could imagine nothing more grotesquely impossible than that he should disclose the sacred story of his life with Betty to these two efficient, intimidating strangers.

A constraint that evidently affected Eric no less than Jacob induced a reference to the weather as soon as the two brothers were left alone, and it was Jacob who made the first effort to open a safe topic. He was afraid of being led into any relation of his own story until he had the attention of both hearers. If the thing was to be done, he must make an occasion for it. To dribble out fragments and then repeat them would hopelessly compromise his chance of producing any air of conviction, and when the dreaded silence came, he seized the moment for an attack.

"I've been looking you up in Whitaker," he said. "You seem to be doing very well."

Eric was standing on the hearthrug, his well-cut frock-coat unbuttoned, and he now pushed back the tails of it, put his hands in his trouser-pockets, and looked down modestly at his patent-leather boots.

"I have been rather lucky," he admitted.

"What's the next thing?" asked Jacob. "A permanent secretaryship, and twelve hundred pounds a year?"

"Not for a few years yet," replied Eric, with a deprecatory smile.

"But I suppose you're getting nearly that now?" persisted Jacob.

"Nine hundred," Eric said. "I had a big rise last year."

Jacob remembered that Doris had money of her own. These two relations of his were well established, and yet, for the first time in his life, he had a strange sense of deferring to them. So long as he could keep on this subject he was safe. He did not envy them money, nor a position, however

influential, in the Civil Service. Only their scholarship intimidated him.

"I never have quite understood what was the work of you permanent officials," he said, and pressed his inquiries until Doris returned. He had found an attitude. He was the artist, decently ignorant of the minutiae of administrative government.

And not until supper was completely started was any mention made of Jacob's book.

Doris began. "We've both read 'John Tristram,'" she said. "We like it immensely."

"Only a beginning," mumbled Jacob.

"Yes, we felt that, in a way," Doris said. "But it's quite a splendid beginning."

"I don't want you to take it too seriously," replied Jacob, modestly preoccupied with his cold chicken.

"We thought you had been rather influenced by Thackeray," put in Eric.

"More particularly 'Vanity Fair' and 'The Newcomes,'" added Doris.

And Eric smartened up the criticism by concluding: "But you're undoubtedly developing a characteristic style of your own. One could see it getting stronger as the book went on."

Jacob had a quiver of terrible doubt.

"I'm afraid the next book . . ." he began, lost his sequence by a parenthesis to the effect that the second book was nearly finished and would possibly be published in the autumn, and then recovered his point clumsily by adding: "But what I was going to say is that I'm afraid the style of it is entirely different to anything in 'Tristram.' I—it's a style that really suits me better—slightly whimsical, fantastic, you know."

"Isn't it supposed to be rather a mistake to change your style?" asked Eric.

"I dare say it is," apologised Jacob.

Eric smiled rather grimly. "You've always erred, I think, on the side of versatility," he said.

Jacob realised that everything was going badly. They had

got him down already. At the opening he had held a tenable position, but now he was exposed to a criticism that was penetrating his literary defences and touching his private life. If he admitted versatility, his anticipated confession was damned. Only a bold counter-attack could save him.

He looked up and met his brother's eyes. "I don't like your description," he said. "Versatility has somehow come to mean weakness. You've kept one line so well yourself, you know, Eric, that you've no sympathy for the empirical method, which is, after all, the scientific method, isn't it?"

He kept his head up, but he felt as if he had boxed his brother's ears.

Eric showed no sign of being offended.

"How far can you carry empiricism in practical life?" he returned. "One must start from certain premisses."

Jacob's mind was whirling with arguments, none of them sufficiently conclusive. "I must stand up to him," he said to himself, "even if I get rude."

"In the Civil Service, no doubt," he said. "I'll admit that at once. But you know perfectly well that all your premisses are open to question. You merely accept them from motives of expediency."

Eric laughed, and looked across at his wife.

"We were discussing that point a few days ago," she explained, "and almost decided that a certain *à priori*sm was absolutely essential."

"In practical life, and science and art, as well as in religion," added Eric.

"Setting up a dummy for someone else to knock down?" suggested Jacob.

"Is it quite that?" asked Doris. "Eric, will you ring?"

The entrance of the maid interrupted the argument, but Jacob was satisfied with the part he had played in it. He had not been crushed, although he had been dependent on his own wit, while his opponents had all the advantages of academic resource. The change of courses had saved him for the time being; in another minute he would have been bewildered and beaten by the citation of authorities and of

the precedents of history. He congratulated himself that he had recovered some of his lost ground, and determined to remain with the initiative. Doris was handicapped by apple-tart and trifle.

Jacob accepted trifle as more easily negotiable for himself, and took up his own line with determination.

"You know, I can't argue with you," he said. "You're both of you too well read. You have me at once when it comes to authorities. But I *am* working towards some sort of a philosophy of my own. I don't want you to run away with the idea that I change my mind every ten minutes."

Doris politely deprecated such an idea, but Eric came in with a definite question:

"What are you living on now?" he asked.

"Reviewing for the *Daily Post* chiefly," replied Jacob. "I'm on the staff for all intents and purposes. I go through the books with the editor once a week, and get a pile to select from."

He thought they were mildly impressed, and modestly gave them some account of his work to keep the conversation on safe ground until they went back to the drawing-room. Nevertheless, his heart was failing him. These little boasts were all very well, but they were quite insufficient as a prelude to the principal movement that must soon be indicated.

"Will you come into the other room? You can smoke there," Eric said, as Doris got up from the table.

7.

No opportunity was presented to him. The conversation had slid to impersonal topics. Eric had been reading a new French philosopher named Bergson, who ought to be translated; he had written a very remarkable essay on the immediate data of consciousness some ten years before, Eric said, and had followed it up more recently with a work entitled, "*Matière et Mémoire*." Jacob was advised to read him.

They were not going to make any further inquiries about his manner of life. Jacob was accepted. He had been difficult

in his younger days, but he had done something to justify his claim to recognition, and could now be received within the learned circle of their acquaintance. They even talked to him as if he were their intellectual equal.

The disclosure of his irregularities became more difficult every minute, and it was half-past nine. He must leave by ten o'clock at the latest. His attention had wandered from the amazing analyses of M. Bergson. What was Doris saying ?

"I'm sorry I didn't hear," Jacob apologised.

"I said you must meet some of our literary friends here," Doris repeated. "We know quite a lot of people who might be useful to you."

"Thanks—yes, I should like to very much," Jacob said. For a moment he did not realise his opportunity, and then he braced himself for the big effort. "Only I ought to tell you," he went on, "that some people might perhaps object to meeting me. There is such a lot of prejudice among—among some people." How much better it would have been if he had said all this earlier. Coming now, it had the air of a shamefaced reservation. And do what he would, he could not help blushing.

He kept his eyes on Doris; he could not look at Eric.

"Oh ! Why ?" she asked. "Why should anyone object ?"

He hesitated until the silence became unendurable. Neither of them gave him any further encouragement. Without question, he was condemned again already—thrust back into the ghetto of the social pariahs. He had bungled hopelessly, and now he might as well give up any hope of placating these two respectable, capable people. He realised for the first time that he had had some wild, foolish dream of returning to Betty with the news that she was to be received at Putney. How incredibly foolish he could be in the affairs of life !

"You two people always paralyse me," he burst out desperately, at last.

"I don't know why we should," Eric said slowly. He had not smoked since supper, but now he took a cigarette from the box on the table.

"I don't think you have ever been quite fair to us," said Doris. She leaned a little forward and shaded her eyes from the fire. "Two years ago last November," she continued, "before baby died, I thought we were beginning to understand each other." Her voice was quite steady, but her tone was gentle, even tender.

"You judge us much more harshly than we have ever judged you," Eric put in.

"I'm sorry," murmured Jacob. "I dare say it has all been my fault." Were they human, after all, he wondered? The suggestion seemed too improbable. He must wait until his story was told before he decided that problem. But the telling of it was become unexpectedly simple. It was no more an admission of improbity, but a test of their quality.

"You see, I have always been a poorish sort of fool," he said. "I never did anything decently, and my marriage made things fifty times worse."

Doris murmured something that he did not catch, but he went on: "And anything I have done now has been due to someone else's influence more than my own determination. She has given me everything I wanted—help and encouragement, and—and . . . love. I was such a desolate sort of creature before."

"Who is she?" asked Eric quietly.

"Her father is the rector of a parish in Buckinghamshire," replied Jacob, stiffening a little. "Some of her people have forgiven her and come to see us, but not her father. And, of course, she has been very miserable in some ways. She is getting over it now; but we lived in Cornwall for six months, and never met a soul."

"Wouldn't your wife divorce you?" suggested Eric.

Jacob shook his head. "She won't—on religious grounds," he added, with a faint sneer.

"What is her name?" asked Doris.

"Betty," replied Jacob. "Her father's name is Gale."

Eric lighted a fresh cigarette. "I admit that it does make it difficult to meet some people," he said. "A friend of Doris's has just gone through the divorce court. She left her

husband for much the same sort of reason that you left your wife."

"But you don't condemn her utterly?" asked Jacob, turning to Doris.

She looked up at him and smiled. "I don't think you understand us in the least," she said. "We are not as prejudiced as you think we are, but we have to know so many people who are—well, particular about that sort of thing."

"Oh, of course," agreed Jacob.

"I'm glad you told us," remarked Eric, and then came another silence. Jacob was still unsure whether they were human or not. They had done the right thing, but they had left themselves unburdened by any responsibility to uphold the rectitude of Jacob's and Betty's attitude.

Jacob sighed. "I'm afraid I must be going," he said. "It's a long way to Great Ormond Street."

Doris looked at her husband.

"You don't think it would be possible to get a divorce?" he asked.

Jacob stood up. "No," he said definitely. "And I don't know that Betty and I are very keen on it either."

"That's all right, no doubt, as a matter of principle," replied Eric. "Doris and I are quite prepared to agree with you, but you must see how difficult the social question is."

"I do," admitted Jacob. "I'm only sorry now that we shan't be able to meet."

"But there's no reason why we shouldn't," Doris said eagerly. "It's only that we can't ask you to meet certain other people."

Jacob flushed. "We don't want to meet people much, you know," he said gently.

"Will you come and have dinner with us quietly one night?" suggested Eric.

8.

Jacob's reaction was complete by the time he reached home.

"I'm the rottenest judge of people that ever lived!" he told Betty. "Eric is perfectly human; I'm not sure that he's not

more human than I am, in a way. I can see now, and I never guessed it till to-night, that he has always wanted to help me, only I wouldn't let him. I got on his nerves. I should have got on anybody's nerves two years ago. I was confoundedly pigheaded and unpractical. And as for Doris, she's a dear, Betty. I know you'll like Doris. Only you mustn't let them terrify you. They are so paralysingly clever; they read all the books before anyone else has heard of them. And they understand what they read. When I thought of my reviewing to-night I felt that I wanted to crawl underground. The cheek of my pretending to review books!"

"And they really don't mind?" asked Betty.

"Not one scrap themselves, but they know so many people who would. I suppose they have to."

"You think they want us to go?"

"I'm absolutely certain they do," Jacob said. He paused a moment, and concluded: "It sounds incredible, but I believe they're rather fond of me in their own way."

XVIII.

RECOGNITION

1.

BETTY was received and approved by Eric and his wife the same week. Doris found an occasion to whisper to Jacob that Betty was "perfectly sweet," a phrase that surprised him by its femininity, but pleased him far more than any expression of deliberate approval, such as Eric's "I should think she is the kind of woman who would certainly help you." But if Eric was still inclined to formality, he was helpful in another way. Doris's statement that she and her husband knew people who might be useful to Jacob, was soon verified. Eric had met no less a person than A. B. Ellis at a Fabian meeting, and had had the temerity to recommend his brother's novel.

Jacob was torn between apprehension and pride when he heard that announcement. Ellis was a comparatively new writer, but his power had been recognised from the publication of his first book.

"That was awfully good of you," Jacob said. "I'm afraid he won't like it, though. I admire his work tremendously—the clearness and vividness of it, you know. I think, in a way, my next book has been rather influenced by Ellis's style. I wish it had been that. Do you think he'll read 'Tristram'?"

"Most probably," Eric said. "I have seen him several times lately, and he has been good enough to ask my advice on one or two occasions. And, by the way, he has had the same matrimonial difficulties as yourselves." He included

Betty in his rather formal smile. "I'm not quite sure whether his wife has divorced him or not."

Jacob could talk of nothing but the chance of meeting A. B. Ellis during the next two days, and did not forget to point out that little matrimonial irregularities were of small account in the literary world, if once you became famous.

Betty smiled and agreed. She had already come to the same conclusion by another road. The truth was that they had found a formula, which even Beechcombe might come to accept in due time. Two months before Jacob Stahl could not be explained. The questions, "Who is he?" "What is he?" could only be answered by devious and unsatisfactory explanations. Now he was the author of "a very promising first novel," a young writer who was going to be well known. He was an explicable person, and Beechcombe could only refuse to accept the explanation on the grounds of ignorance or of disapproval of Jacob's work. Nevertheless, Betty had no intention of approaching her father as yet. She felt that the first advances must come from him. They could wait.

But she sent a copy of "Tristram" to Hilda a week after her little girl was born, and had an answer a few days later in which Hilda held out hopes that she might possibly be able to come to town with her husband in April to stay with his married sister, and concluded: "We should so like to come and see you both, and bring baby!"

"They are all coming round," was Jacob's comment. "Fancy our receiving the Established Church on terms of amity!"

"With reservations," remarked Betty. "They might come here, but they wouldn't ask us to his sister's."

"No, obviously," replied Jacob. "But I don't think that that matters."

"Only to this extent," Betty said, "that it's not much use trying to keep in with them. Of course, I shall try and see Hilda now and then."

"But you'll let them come?" urged Jacob.

"Oh yes! Why not?" Betty said.

And early in May the visitation was actually made, and

Mr. Phelps was revealed to Jacob as a decently representative young Rector, and a proud, if reasonably modest, father. He was evidently concerned to do the right things in those unaccustomed surroundings, sedulously avoided any approach to controversial topics, and, when he and Jacob were left alone while Betty and Hilda adjourned to the bedroom to perform some ceremony required by the four-months-old infant, became intensely earnest in his desire for Jacob's opinion on the novelists of the day. They appeared to have ended for Mr. Phelps with Anthony Trollope and Charles Kingsley, though he entered a caustic comment on the "blasphemies" of Robert Elsmere. Through it all he had the air of a man whose curiosity and interest were piqued by his surroundings. He might have worn the same manner if he had been making his first visit to the green-room of a theatre.

Hilda was much more at her ease. She was a young mother, and any comment she might have had to make would necessarily have been influenced by that fact. Jacob thought her pretty, and was much engaged in watching her charming antics with her little daughter. Phelps he summed up as being "all right," and added: "But I've no use for him, of course. I might as well have been talking to a South Sea Islander over the telephone." He had brought an early reference to his acquaintance with Ellis—they had met twice then—into the conversation, and had been shocked to find that Ellis's name was quite unknown to the Phelps.

Jacob was a little impatient of Betty's evident pleasure in the re-establishment of the old relations with her sister.

"I didn't know you cared so much for her," he said.

"It's nice to feel that we understand one another again," Betty explained. It appeared that she and Hilda had "had it all out" while Jacob had been discussing literature with Phelps, and it had been tentatively suggested that Betty and Jacob might go to stay for a few days in the Worcestershire parsonage, if they would consent to the fiction—for parochial purposes—of an antecedent wedding.

"We'll go, if you like," Jacob said. "I expect it'll be pretty dull."

But Betty shook her head. "Not on those terms," she said; and Jacob, misunderstanding her, protested that she was too sensitive.

She did not enlighten him on that occasion.

2.

Jacob finished his second novel at the end of April, and submitted it in the ordinary course to the publishers of "John Tristram." Eric had advised him that he should insist upon some advance against royalties on this occasion, and Jacob touched lightly upon that suggestion when he sent in his manuscript.

The interview that followed was not entirely satisfactory.

"The Creature of Circumstance" was more than approved. Mr. Norman especially gave it high praise, but, speaking on behalf of the firm, he was inclined to advise the postponement of publication until after Mr. Stahl had finished the second part of "John Tristram." This advice, Mr. Norman explained, was a matter of policy. The first book, despite its good notices, had not been a financial success. He appealed to his partner, who referred to a typewritten statement, and reported the net sales to date as five hundred and twenty-seven copies, and then passed over the account to Jacob, who stared at it steadily while the gentle voice of Mr. Norman continued the exposition.

In the circumstances, he urged, it was hardly wise to put out a second book in an entirely new manner, for although "Tristram" had not been eagerly sought for by the general public, it was still selling, nearly four months after publication. And if the second part followed within a reasonable time, the sales might be re-stimulated. Most books sold for six weeks—seven or eight hundred copies, perhaps—and then the sale ceased absolutely. "Tristram" was obviously in another class. It did not appeal to a wide public, but it interested certain people, who recommended it to their friends, and so the sales went on, steadily, if slowly. But if this second book were published in the autumn, Mr. Stahl's

small but potentially faithful readers might be alienated. They would expect more "Tristrams"; they might be disgusted to find a fantasy in its place. Nevertheless, the firm understood that this might seem rather hard on Mr. Stahl, and they were prepared to accept "The Creature of Circumstance," and to pay twenty-five pounds advance royalties on it, if the author would consent to leave the date of its publication to the firm's discretion.

Jacob listened to the whole proposition without making a single interruption. If he had been alone, he might have consented without demur. The policy that had been outlined was perfectly reasonable, and was prompted, without question, by a genuine regard for his own success as a novelist. But Betty was waiting for him at their old rendezvous—this had been adjudged as another "occasion"—and he knew that he dared not face her with the announcement that his new book had been "put back." They had counted such an enormous brood of chickens as emerging from that next sitting.

"I'm sorry," Jacob said, with a look of slightly harassed determination. "I'm afraid I couldn't do that."

He knew that he was perfectly safe, that he would have no difficulty in placing the book under discussion with another publisher; but he was thinking less of that than of Betty's disapproval, and at the same time he was very anxious not to hurt the feelings of Messrs. Norman and Goodrich. He remembered that they had befriended him when he was a rejected author.

Mr. Norman looked at his partner, who fidgetted with some papers on the table in front of him.

"We were rather afraid . . ." began Mr. Norman, and then waited for Jacob's explanation.

"I'm a perfect ass at business," Jacob said. He felt that he must be frank. He could not play Farmer's game, even now that he held a winning hand. "I see your point, and I think it's a good one; but I can't wait. I can't afford to wait, you know. You see, I'm thirty-six. I began to write rather late, and I want now to pile on everything I can. I'm

too old to adopt a policy like yours. I couldn't get the second part of 'Tristram' finished before about March next year, and by that time people will have forgotten all about me. I must keep them going with this next book. Besides, I don't want to label myself as a writer of a certain class of fiction. It's no good. I shan't stick to one sort, ever. I'm like that. I'm too . . ." He hesitated for a word, and, remembering Eric's description, tried "versatile," and then, afraid of the boastful sound of it, he added: "I'm too easily influenced, I suppose. I'm sure it would be a mistake to rub in the impression that all my books will be 'Tristrams,' when they most certainly won't."

"But when you are a little better known . . ." suggested Mr. Goodrich.

"Yes, it might be better in the end; but I can't afford to wait," remonstrated Jacob. He was quite convinced now that his own argument was sound.

"When did you want us to publish the new book?" asked Mr. Norman.

"Fairly early in the autumn," Jacob said.

And the firm gave way with a readiness that was certainly complimentary. Jacob had said nothing of taking his book to another publisher's, but his definite refusal of Mr. Norman's suggestion had implied a fine independence, and it was encouragingly evident that the firm of Norman Goodrich believed that the novels of Jacob Stahl would eventually pay the cost of publication.

There was one other point that Jacob had intended to make during the interview—namely, a demand for a bolder advertising campaign than had been possible for "John Tristram." He had meant to make several expert suggestions, based on his experience as a writer of advertisements; but Norman and Goodrich had treated him so generously, and had already made so many concessions, that it seemed to him that any further demand would smack of overbearance. He could not endure the thought that he should seem to be taking any unfair advantage.

"They had given way about everything," he explained to

Betty in their hallowed basement. "They're going to publish the 'Creature' early in September; they're giving me an advance of twenty-five pounds on publication, and higher royalties. I couldn't, after that, turn round and insist upon expensive advertisement. 'John Tristram' has only sold five hundred and twenty-seven copies, you see, and they must have lost money on it."

Betty agreed, and speculated on the probability that Jacob would make Norman Goodrich's fortunes as well as his own.

He had consented to give them the refusal of any sequel or sequels that he might write to his first book.

3.

Jacob began the second part of "John Tristram" before he and Betty left London, and when they went to Cornwall, early in June, he had the whole scheme of the book quite clearly in his mind. He had found it surprisingly easy to return to his earlier manner, although he recognised that he was correcting the more obvious faults of his first effort. Some of his reviewers had helped him in that particular.

They took a furnished cottage some six or seven miles from Trevarrian that year. Their income was increasing. They could expect a certain forty pounds from Norman Goodrich, Limited, in the autumn, and "Tristram" had been published in America, and some further additions might be expected from that source. Also, Jacob had had a slightly fantastic sketch accepted by one of the reviews, and he had ideas for one or two short stories that he was confidently counting upon as a further source of income. He thought he knew now precisely where his earlier attempts at short-story writing had failed.

They were both full of hope that summer, and found great joy in sitting by the sea and planning their future. It seemed that the road to success lay clear and accessible before them.

And when "The Creature of Circumstance" was published

in September, they were almost afraid that success had come too soon. They were back in London then, and, on the strength of their expectations, had taken a tiny flat near Gospel Oak, and bought furniture on the hire system.

The reviews of the new book were certainly wonderful. Mr. Gresswell had written that Mr. Stahl was opening up a "new field of fiction," and had achieved something that might "justly be called original." And their unknown friend on the *Morning Post* had given Jacob a whole column, and described the book as "a wonderful effort of vision and imagination." Some of the other notices were nearly as good, although *The Times* still maintained a majestic silence.

Betty laid the burden of the book's failure on the already well-weighted shoulders of a gentleman in South Africa, an individual whose works became so absorbingly interesting on the 9th of October, that no one had a thought for the reading of novels. But if President Kruger's ultimatum and its consequences were the sole cause for the failure of "The Creature of Circumstance," it is difficult to account for the fact that "John Tristram" continued to sell in dribblets of seven and thirteen copies through November and the first half of December. And in the light afforded by a later experiment, and in the relative clearness of mind that followed the taking of Pretoria, Jacob was able to decide that the matter of his second book, not less than the unfortunate moment of its publication, must be held accountable for its failure. It never sold five hundred copies in all, and no American publisher would look at it.

But whoever was to blame—Kruger, Chamberlain, a group of South African millionaires, the novel-reading public, or Jacob himself—the depressing fact that had to be faced through that depressing winter was the partial failure of their sources of income. Jacob's reviewing exhibited a lamentable falling-off. There was much less space given to literary matters in the *Daily Post*, and the publishing season was considerably influenced by the dominant topic. And it seemed possible that Norman Goodrich might not be

over-anxious to take up their option on the second part of "John Tristram" at the beginning of the next year.

Betty had a very anxious and difficult task to accomplish in the allaying of Jacob's gloom, and the stimulation of his energies to complete the novel he had in hand. She achieved her purpose by a persistent threat to go out and earn a living as a cook. She did not intend it as a threat. She was perfectly willing, even eager, to find some work that might occupy her. She had lost Freda now. That young woman had soon tired of inactivity as a hanger-on at Mrs. Letchworth's boarding-house, had entered herself as a probationer at St. George's Hospital in January, and had now volunteered and been accepted for Red Cross work at the front.

Betty found time hanging heavily on her hands. None of their new acquaintances greatly interested her, and although she had joined one of the more practical societies that were honestly trying to cater for the real needs of the soldiers in South Africa, that work did not satisfy her. She wanted to make money and help with the household.

And it was through her endeavours that the threat came into being. She had actually succeeded in getting an offer of eighteen shillings a week for a place as cook in an experimental amateur tea-shop, before she mooted the proposition to Jacob.

He opposed the scheme with great vigour, and finally, more by pleading than argument, induced her to abandon the project. But the threat stimulated him. He realised that he was doing less than his best to make an income, and laboriously set himself to write stories and sketches that had some sort of relation to the horrible subject of war. He succeeded so far, that he and Betty never quite touched the fatal depths of insolvency.

They were lucky enough to let their little flat furnished in April, 1900, and Norman Goodrich, Limited, magnificently came up to the scratch by advancing fifty pounds on the second part of "John Tristram," and publishing it in the middle of May.

Jacob and Betty returned to the Cornish cottage in the

spring with a feeling that the worst was over, and so took no part in the awful celebrations that disgraced London during the summer.

4.

During that year Jacob wrote his fourth novel, "The Deserted House," the book that brought him a measure of recognition and independence. The second part of "John Tristram" had been a qualified success. It sold one thousand six hundred copies in England, and so far stimulated the sales of its predecessor in that kind, that Messrs. Norman Goodrich debated the advisability of a second impression. But "The Deserted House" sold over six thousand copies in three months, and more than twice that number in America.

"In a sense, you know, we've got there," remarked Jacob, as he looked with a curiously detached interest at the cheque for three hundred and seven pounds that had arrived from his American publishers.

"I always knew you would," said Betty. She was far more excited than he was.

She leaned over his shoulder, her arm round his neck, and they stared together at the miraculous slip of paper.

"It isn't only this, you see, the actual cash," Jacob went on, "it's the significance of it. I shall be able to make my own terms for the next book, I shall get a market for my short stories in America, and I shall be able to give up reviewing."

"We'll have a holiday to-day," Betty announced.

"I'm afraid not to-day, dear," Jacob said. "I must get off those two books I'm doing. Gresswell particularly asked for them. To-morrow . . ."

"Oh, bother!" remarked Betty.

Jacob looked up at her and smiled. "You ought to be proud of having trained me so well," he said. "There was a time when I always wanted to slack, and you made me work."

"You seem to have got the habit of working now," she said.

"I don't know," replied Jacob. "I think I shall take it

a little easier in future; but, you see, I'm playing a winning game now. I've never chucked a game when I had it in hand, but this is the first time in the practical affairs of life that I could ever boast of being certainly on the winning side."

Betty thought for a moment before she answered him. "Then my work's done," she said. "You don't want me any more."

He laughed gaily, and drew her down on to his knee. "I'm supposed to have an imagination," he said, "but I cannot imagine life without you. My only picture of it is misery in a Newquay boarding-house. That was my one idea when I thought you weren't coming to Trevarrian, and I've never had another."

They discussed that topic for a few minutes, and then Jacob said: "I don't know if you're aware of it, my beloved, but you are certainly getting fatter."

She jumped up at once, and her hands went to her waist. "Oh, Jimmy, don't!" she implored him. "I've been afraid . . ."

Jacob waved the cheque at her. "We're rich," he said. "You shall go to Carlsbad."

XIX.

THE INVISIBLE EVENT

1.

ONE morning in the November of 1902, Jacob received a letter that had been forwarded by his publishers.

"It isn't an advertisement from a press-cutting agency," he remarked, studying the envelope, "so it's probably an appreciation from another unknown admirer."

"Open it," replied Betty, a little impatiently. They had never been besieged by such appreciations as this. Jacob's work lacked that sentimentality which evokes a personal response from young women warmed to a hopeful interest in the imagined author, and he and Betty were still exhilarated by any such individual attention from the outside public.

"Don't be in a hurry," Jacob said. "Let's savour the bouquet before we taste the wine." He examined the post-marks deliberately, and then added in a less satisfied tone: "Norman and Goodrich are rotters! They must have had this in their office for five days."

Betty had given him up and sat down to her breakfast.

"I suppose you will open it sometime," she remarked.

Jacob smiled. "Don't you realise how much sweeter it is to anticipate a pleasure than to taste it?" he asked, as he at last opened the envelope.

"Read it to me," pleaded Betty, as he still maintained silence; and then she got up quickly and went over to him.

"What is it, darling?" she asked. "Not bad news?"

"Good Lord! After all these years," murmured Jacob. He gave her the letter, and walked over to the fireplace.

"Is it from . . . Lola?" asked Betty.
He nodded. "Practically," he said. "Read it."

"DEAR SIR" (she read),

"Your wife has asked me to write to you. She would like to see you, but feels that she would prefer not to write on her own account. I may tell you, however, that she has long since forgiven you for your desertion of her, although she has no wish ever to renew the old relations. Her true reason for wanting to see you at the present time is that she has recently been reading your novels, two of which, I am told, are intimately autobiographical, and she would like to soften the impression of her own character that you have apparently formed. Since she has been with me here she has been the most devoted and unselfish of workers in the greatest of all causes, but her health has been somewhat uncertain for the past two months. I trust that you will be able to come and see her here one afternoon in the course of the next few days. It is most certainly your duty to do so. . . .

"Yours faithfully,

"HELENA MURGATROYD."

"Shall you go?" asked Betty, when she had finished.

"I don't know. What do you think?" returned Jacob.

"Do you want to go?" asked Betty. She was watching him keenly, as if she doubted whether after all these years he had not still some tenderness for his wife, some feeling that he would never admit.

Jacob hesitated. "I don't want to see her," he said, after a judicial pause. "I would infinitely rather not; but it seems rather mean, in a way, not to go. And the letter was written nearly a week ago, and I've never answered."

"You can easily explain that," Betty said. "You can send Mrs. What's-her-name the envelope."

"You don't want me to go," affirmed Jacob.

"I don't mind in the least," Betty said.

"I'll write and explain," he volunteered.

"You'd better go," she said.

For a minute or two they fenced, and then Betty suddenly threw off her reserve.

"You must care for her in a way," she said. "I don't like to think of your sitting there and talking to her."

"It would be absolutely like talking to a stranger," asserted Jacob.

"Oh, it couldn't be!" Betty protested. "She's your wife, and I don't trust her. She might ask you to go back to her."

Jacob was too astonished to find an apt reply. "She *might* ask," he said, and tried to express by his tone the utter futility of such a request.

He felt so safe, so confident, and he wanted to pay that call. He saw it in the light of a new experience, an adventure. While he had unconvincingly stated his determination to write, making some excuse to Mrs. Murgatroyd, he had been picturing a rather delicately tense scene with Lola. As he saw it, their meeting had the fine, remote air of an epilogue.

"We may as well have breakfast, I suppose," remarked Betty.

"Yes, I think we'd better," agreed Jacob. He had a curious feeling of guilt—an unwarranted sense of having done something shameful.

They ate their breakfast in silence. Jacob had decided that he would not go to see Lola, but he was resentful now. He thought Betty had been absurdly prejudiced. He certainly would do nothing to hurt her; it was unthinkable that he could see Lola if Betty had any feeling about it, but he had expected her to be more sensible. Her curious retrospective jealousy had shown that she failed to understand his love for her.

When he had finished breakfast, he buried himself in his newspaper.

Betty came up to his chair and gently took the paper from him. "I'm sorry, darling," she said. "I hated something in the tone of that letter. It seemed to suggest an air of proprietorship. Of course you must go. You'd better go this afternoon."

Jacob protested honestly then, that he had no wish to obey Mrs. Murgatroyd's orders.

"Yes, you must," Betty said. "But don't stay long," she added

2.

Jacob inquired for Mrs. Murgatroyd. He was not sure whether his wife had used her own name during the last nine years. The neat parlourmaid showed him into a tiny room off the hall, and returned almost immediately. "Will you come this way?" she said.

Mrs. Murgatroyd was sitting at an immense writing-table, that thrust one end into the deep bay window overlooking the well-kept strip of garden behind the house. She was a stout, solid woman, with grey hair, and black, threatening eyebrows. She did not get up when Jacob came into the room, nor offer to shake hands with him. She stared at him with an embarrassing directness, and pointed to a chair on her left hand.

"You are Jacob Stahl?" she said.

"Yes," he said quietly, still standing. He was affronted by her manner, and had no intention of allowing himself to be snubbed.

"You are too late," remarked Mrs. Murgatroyd sharply.

He did not understand her. His mind was still full of the anticipated interview. Now that it was so near he had begun to dread it. Lola would put on an intolerant air of righteousness, he thought, and he would have to submit.

"I'm sorry that I've been so long in coming," he said stiffly. "It was not my fault." He put his hand in his pocket and drew out Mrs. Murgatroyd's letter. "I only received it this morning," he explained, as he laid the envelope on the big writing-table.

She glanced at the letter without interest.

"I dare say it's just as well," she said. "Poor Lola made a point of seeing you, although I strongly advised her against it. No good would have been done."

Jacob was puzzled. "Has she gone away . . ." he began.

"Didn't you see that the blinds were down in the front of the house?" asked Mrs. Murgatroyd.

"No, I didn't notice. Why . . .?" he said.

"She died yesterday morning," replied Mrs. Murgatroyd coldly. "She developed pneumonia the day after I wrote to you. She was only ill three days."

She continued some explanation, but Jacob did not hear what she said. He fumbled for the chair she had indicated when he came in, and sat down. His mind was still full of that impossible interview, and he wanted to make some immense atonement for the bitterness of his thoughts. . . .

Mrs. Murgatroyd raised her voice and dragged back his wandering attention.

"You need not be too hard on yourself," she said.

Jacob was astonished by the aptness of her remark. "You see, I never imagined . . ." he stammered.

"We never do," replied Mrs. Murgatroyd. "Perhaps it's better that we shouldn't. I should think both of you were far too apt to let your imaginations run away with you. I can answer for poor Lola, at least; and from the look of you, I can only suppose that you spend the best part of your life in dreaming."

"I dare say I do," assented Jacob. He had a defence ready in his mind; he was prepared to maintain that the dreamers not less than the doers had their function in society, but he recognised that such an argument was out of place. Moreover, he had lost his feeling of resentment against Mrs. Murgatroyd. Her manner might be abominably brusque, but he admired people who had the courage to speak their opinions without equivocation.

"Now that I have seen you," she was saying, "I know that I was justified in keeping you and Lola apart, when Cecil wanted to bring you together seven or eight years ago. I must write to him. Have you seen him lately?"

"Mr. Barker? No," replied Jacob. "I haven't seen him since I left Camden Town."

"He grew tired of you, I presume?"

"He did a great deal for me," Jacob said, with a sudden

fervour of loyalty. "I have always had an immense respect for him."

Mrs. Murgatroyd's stern, handsome face expressed no shade of approval or disapproval, but she slightly shrugged her massive shoulders as if to dismiss the topic of Cecil Barker, and said abruptly:

"Would you care to see her?"

Jacob winced. "I don't know. Is it any use?" he said.

"Are you afraid?" asked Mrs. Murgatroyd.

"No! Why should I be?" he prevaricated. "Only I don't . . ."

"I should like you to see her," returned Mrs. Murgatroyd. She rose from her chair with a firm, resolute movement that was in itself an unchallengeable order. "It will help you to understand," she said.

Jacob understood that he had no alternative.

Mrs. Murgatroyd preceded him up the stairs.

3.

The jaw had been unbound, and the dead, white lips had fallen slightly apart; the expression of the cold clay face was one of slightly self-satisfied approval.

Jacob was repelled, but he could not realise that he was looking at the body of a human being whom he had once held passionately in his arms.

She had aged and altered in those nine years. This was the mask of a woman he had never known—the exquisitely perfect effigy in wax of some strange nun who had a curious facial resemblance to Lola.

Mrs. Murgatroyd was watching him curiously, but neither of them spoke.

He stood there for a few seconds only, and then turned away his eyes and moved to the door.

Mrs. Murgatroyd covered up the dead face on the bed and followed him.

At the hall-door she laid a strong, white hand on his arm.

"I believe you are living with some other woman now," she said.

Jacob turned upon her almost savagely. "I am," he replied.

"Are you going to marry her?" asked Mrs Murgatroyd, with the same stern immobility she had shown throughout.

"Certainly I am," returned Jacob.

"I should take time to think it over," was the unexpected advice he received.

"Do you mean that you don't believe in marriage?" he asked.

"Not for you," replied Mrs. Murgatroyd coldly. "You are like Lola, far too impressionable. Good-bye."

4.

He pondered that statement as he walked down Brixton Hill, and found an explanation as he waited in the dreary shed on the station platform. A porter advised him that the main-line train for Victoria would come in first, and when the local ran in on the other side, he had not time to cross. He had plenty of time for reflection. When he reached Victoria, he had more than an hour's ride in the yellow horse-bus that would take him as far as the Lower Heath. The indulgence of taking a hansom for so long a distance seemed too great an extravagance. London was such an immense place in those days.

He decided that Mrs. Murgatroyd had made a mistake. He was not impressionable in the sense she had intended. He reacted powerfully to certain stimuli, and gained the material of literature from the experience; but he was not emotional as Lola had been. She had found her complement in a woman, in the strong, intellectual personality of Mrs. Murgatroyd. His own complement was of quite another type. Lola had needed command, he had needed sympathy and understanding, and, perhaps, some restraint. . . .

He wondered what Betty would say when she heard his news. And as his thoughts turned towards her and the little

flat in Hampstead, the picture of the waxen effigy in the Brixton house began to lose its significance. For a little time he had been strangely impressed; he had lost his sense of his relations with life; he had been alone again with the problem of his own individuality. Now he remembered that he and Betty were free to marry if they would, and took himself to task inasmuch as he seemed for a moment to have forgotten her.

He had little doubt that she would be infinitely relieved. The irregularity of their relations was still a source of small inconveniences. There were so many people who might object, and Betty was a little too conscientious in her desire to avoid false pretences. He had overruled her objections on more than one occasion, but he knew that she was never happy in the acquaintance of anyone who was unaware that she had not gone through the orthodox ceremony of marriage. "It might so easily get round to them," she argued, "and then I should feel horrid about it." He had had to admit sometimes that her position was a little awkward.

And then there was another point of even greater importance. If they were legally married, they might have children. They had discussed that question once or twice, and had agreed that, however contemptible the moral objection, the legal and social handicaps imposed by the conventions of their times were too great to hazard parenthood. The child might be horribly penalised. He and Betty might die and leave it almost unprovided for. They had never doubted the impossibility of that risk.

His spirits rose as he contemplated the new ease that marriage would bring to them. He had not changed his opinions since he had first argued with Betty in the Montague Place boarding-house more than five years ago; but the game was not worth the candle. Their courage served no end. They had not made, had never tried to make, a convert. They suffered the inconveniences and trials of the pioneer for no purpose. They were breaking no new ground for those that might come after them. . . .

He ran joyfully up the stairs to the flat, and only pulled

himself together as he was opening the front door. He remembered then that, whatever benefits might follow, he had to announce a death.

5.

Betty took it very quietly.

"Poor soul!" she said. "I suppose she was well looked after."

Jacob had no doubts on that score. They talked for a few minutes about Lola's past history, and Jacob attempted to describe the personality of Mrs. Murgatroyd.

"I suppose this will make a considerable difference to us," he remarked presently. He brought it out with a casual air, as if he touched upon a subject of mutual agreement. He was surprised that Betty had not initiated the topic, and wondered if she had some feminine delicacy in making the first suggestion.

"Will it?" she asked innocently. "I don't see why."

He raised his eyebrows and stared at her quizzically. "Well!" he remarked. "And this from a daughter of Beechcombe!"

She flushed a little. "Oh, that!" she said. "Have you changed your mind about it all, then?"

"Not in the least," he asserted. "I believe everything I believed five years ago, but it isn't worth the fag now. I want you to be at your ease with everyone."

"You want us to go through a ceremony of marriage?" she insisted.

"Yes; why not?" he replied, with a slight uneasiness.

She laughed. "Oh, I've got beyond that," she said.

"Do you mean that you would sooner not?"

"Of course I do," she said, without hesitation. "My conscience has quite ceased to trouble me now, dear. Look at me, a convinced convert."

"I know you are, and I'm tremendously glad, darling," he returned; "but I think it will save no end of trouble. . . ."

"Oh, it's only a convenience, then?" she put in.

He pursed his mouth. "Well, yes, I suppose so," he agreed.

"And you want me to deny my principles a second time for the sake of convenience?" she asked.

He was puzzled and rather hurt. "I don't understand you," he said.

"You never have, and you never will, about that," she replied. "But I should have thought you would have realised that, after facing the inconveniences all these years, I should prefer to go on facing them now sooner than pretend to a virtue that I don't possess—if it is a virtue? Don't look so distressed, dear. I'm not angry. But don't you understand that I have taken it all rather more seriously, apparently, than you have. I tried to believe you were right five years ago, and it took me a long time, but I have quite come over now."

Jacob looked at the fire and made no answer.

"And I'm not sure that it would be a good thing for you to marry me," she went on.

He looked up quickly. "Why ever not?" he asked.

"You might feel too sure of me then," she said gently; and when he began to interrupt her, she leaned forward and took his hand. "Don't think I doubt you, darling," she said. "It's only that you might feel tied if we were married."

"Not more than I do now," he interpolated.

"Oh yes, much more," she said. "There's nothing in the world now to prevent us from separating if we wanted to. We are both free to go our own ways, just as Freda and that man Laurence did. If we were married, we should feel bound to one another. Just think of some of the married people we know. I wonder how long they would go on if they weren't afraid of what people would say. And so they hang on and are miserable, and hate each other, and set an awful example to their children. But we've made our declaration of independence. The people we know best and like best know all about us, and none of them could blame us if we chose to go our own ways. Could they? That's part of the bargain."

She paused, but he did not reply. He was still holding her hand and gazing into the fire.

"Well," she urged him. "Isn't it true? What are you thinking about?"

"I was thinking of that farmhouse in Trevarrian," he said, "and of you. Particularly of one evening when I said to you that some day we should laugh at all our miseries—*your* miseries they were chiefly. But, good Lord! I never thought that the time would come when I should be urging you to marry me and you wouldn't have me at any price."

"I think I take things more seriously than you do," she said.

"Yes; you are stronger and more consistent all through," Jacob said thoughtfully. "You're thorough, and I suppose I'm not. When you're convinced, you stick to it. I ought to be almighty proud of myself for having converted you."

"You did it very thoroughly," she said.

He smiled and kissed her, and then he got up and began to pace the room.

"This is the invisible event that we made mouths at for so long," he said. "Do you remember the quotation? I think it's Hamlet. And, good Heavens! how truly great we were with our immense arguments! Oh, Betty, think of all that time in Montague Place."

"I was very silly then," she admitted quietly.

"You weren't," Jacob replied. "You were consistent, that's all. You were right then, and you are right now. You've always been true to yourself. The belief or unbelief in the convention of marriage is of no importance whatever. The thing is that you've always tried to do what you believed to be right. Yes, even when you denied your conscience and came to Trevarrian."

He stopped his walk up and down the room, and knelt by her chair. "You're very, very wonderful, my beloved Betty," he said. "You needn't be afraid that I should ever chafe at the thought that I was *tied* to you. I want to be bound by any bond that could hold me a tiny bit closer. I'm only an unimportant part of you."

For a few moments they held each other tightly without speaking, and then Jacob released himself.

"But we are going to be married within a week, all the same," he said.

"I would sooner not," Betty replied firmly.

"I'm sorry, dear," he returned; "but there's a reason."

"What reason?" she asked, with a hint of obstinacy in her voice.

"I want to see a little Betty and a little Jimmy," he said; "and we can't ever do that until . . ."

"I don't mind," she interrupted him—"even as things are now, I mean."

"I do," Jacob said. "It wouldn't be fair to them. We've agreed about that. It isn't worth the risk. They might blame us afterwards. No, darling, you sacrificed your conscience once for me, and now you've got to sacrifice it again for them."

She did not answer him at once. She was leaning forward, her chin in her hands, staring at an engraving of a Madonna and Child on the opposite wall.

"What a silly world it is!" she said at last.

XX.

THE BEGINNING OF LIFE

1.

THE matron of the Nursing Home advised Jacob to return in two or three hours. He looked at his watch, and found that the time was a quarter past six.

"It might go on all night, I suppose?" he said, hoping for a firm denial of such a pessimistic estimate.

"You can never be quite sure," the matron replied cheerfully. "But I don't expect a very long confinement in this case; personally, I should think the child will be born early to-morrow morning."

Jacob attempted no contradiction of expert opinion, but in his own mind he was quite convinced that it would be earlier.

"And I may come back about half-past eight?" he asked. "I shan't be in your way?"

The matron smiled. "We don't take any notice of husbands at these times," she said. "You can use this room as if it was your own."

Jacob expressed his gratitude. He was very glad that he and Betty had decided upon a Nursing Home. Everyone about the place was so efficient, and the matron was quite charming. . . .

So far everything had gone splendidly. Betty had packed all her things ten days before, and when the first symptoms had declared themselves, he had gone out and found a four-wheeler, and Betty had been put to bed in the Home before the labour pains began.

He had sat with her for more than an hour, holding her hand, and wondering if she were concealing her agony from him, or if those recurring spasms were not really so awful as he had imagined. She had declared that if the pains were not much worse than those she was suffering, she could bear them almost with a smile. But they had both anticipated a steady increase of torture as the time approached, although neither of them had spoken their forebodings.

"You'll go out and get yourself some dinner," she had said as he was leaving her, and he had been touched by her thought of him at such a moment.

2.

There was a smell of frost in the air, and he breathed it with a feeling of exhilaration when the door of the Nursing Home closed behind him. He felt released. For a moment he was glad to be alone. He wondered where he could get dinner. Maida Vale seemed a very remote place; and then he remembered a restaurant in Chapel Street.

But as he turned with a sudden determination towards the Edgware Road, all the spirit went out of him. Something called to him and dragged him back. How could he go and eat when Betty was lying there in pain? He was afraid to go so far away.

He turned and looked back into the feebly lighted depths of the broad avenue.

He had two hours to get through. He must not return until half-past eight. The matron had been very kind, but obviously he was a nuisance, and he could do no good there. Betty had every possible attention. She would not be alone for a single moment. And he had solemnly promised her that he would go and have some dinner. He need not go so far as Chapel Street; there was a dairy at the corner of Clifton Road that would probably be open until eight o'clock.

The dairy was nearly empty, and he sat down near the door. The waitress brought him a printed menu-card, but the name of food made him feel sick. He ordered coffee, bread-and-butter, and an egg.

He was immensely concerned with his own carelessness. He ought to have left instructions at the Nursing Home as to where he might be found if he were urgently needed. He went over to the counter and asked the manageress if there was a telephone he might use; but she told him that their telephone was out of repair, and began a long story of her grievances against the National Telephone Company. He heard every detail with a miraculous comprehension. He felt that he was attending to the history of some extraordinary tragedy. He pictured the manageress suffering the most excruciating agony until a new telephone instrument should be born to her.

The torture of it was unendurable. "Oh, it's bound to come soon," he said with great earnestness. "It must. They couldn't leave you waiting like that for long. No one could."

He did not hear her reply. He went back to the table on which his meal had been laid, and tried to eat. He could not see that the plump manageress was grossly offended—that she thought he had been making a portentous joke of her grievance.

He could not eat his egg or his bread-and-butter, although he tried to keep his promise to Betty. He felt so sick that he was afraid to stay in the dairy. He drank his coffee, paid the bill, and went out.

It was a quarter past seven, and he decided that he would go back at once to the Nursing Home, and walk up and down outside the house until half-past eight. He ran most of the way.

He wanted to think, but his mind refused to consider any subject but Betty's agony. He wanted fervently to share it with her. He had read in some feminist book that women had all the pain and men the pleasure in this business of bringing children into the world. He admitted that the statement was a true one, but the penalty paid, the loss incurred, was man's. He would gladly have given ten years of life if he could have shared the pain with Betty. How he would have welcomed physical pain as a relief from this torture of

waiting, this utter inability to spare Betty a single pang of her throes !

And this was only the beginning. For six, nine, perhaps twelve hours he might have to wait in that contradictorily cheerful sitting-room, listening, suffering, like some tortured victim of war forced to witness the outrage and murder of his wife.

3.

At five minutes to eight he rang impatiently at the bell of the Nursing Home.

The cheerful matron was in the hall.

"If you listen," she said, "you'll hear something."

He caught his breath, and heard a thin, but fierce and prolonged scream—the indignant, resentful cry of the new-born infant.

"By Jove ! it *has* got a voice," Jacob said hysterically. He was quite unashamed of the tears that were running down his cheeks. . . .

The doctor came into the waiting-room a few minutes later. He was a quiet, rather shy man, with none of the mannerisms of the general practitioner.

He said that Betty had been splendid, and that the child was a fine boy weighing eight and a half pounds. "I gave her a whiff of chloroform at the end," he added. "You can see her for a minute—not longer—if you'll wait for a quarter of an hour."

Jacob felt that he loved this controlled, efficient specialist, who had so wonderfully wrought a miracle, and was now quietly hurrying away to spend all his gifts of knowledge, foresight, and endurance in yet another exercise of his super-human abilities.

Jacob wished that it was within his power to confer some stupendous honour upon so worthy and lofty-minded a recipient. . . .

4.

Betty was lying on her back with no pillow under her head. She was very pale after the chloroform, but quite conscious. She smiled feebly as Jacob bent down and kissed her.

"Is it a nice baby?" she whispered.

He straightened himself and looked round the room. The nurse had gone away for a moment, but he guessed that the child must be lying in the little lace-trimmed cot that stood upon two chairs near the foot of the bed.

He went and peered in, and saw nothing, and then he nervously lifted the tiny blanket that covered some small object crouched in the middle of the cot—a little, wizened, naked thing it was, with purple blotches on its body, and a thick red down on its head. And as he lifted the blanket it wriggled and began again to cry fiercely.

Jacob dropped the blanket as if he had been stung, and returned to the bed. Betty was lying with closed eyes.

"It's a lovely baby," he said gently, "with a lot of hair. The doctor told me it weighed eight and a half pounds."

She opened her eyes and smiled again.

"Is it really?" she asked.

"Rather," whispered Jacob. "I say, are you all right?"

She nodded contentedly.

"I must go," Jacob said, bending over her again. "I hear the nurse coming back."

She murmured something that he could not catch, and then she repeated it in a firmer voice.

"Did you get your dinner?" she asked.

5.

For some time after he left her he could think of nothing but her amazing care for him; and then he remembered that poor little naked creature under the blanket in its lace-trimmed cot.

That was their son—the magical child that had come, none knew whence, to take his place in the world; a new being

sprung wonderfully to life to claim his heritage of the flesh and proclaim his individuality. He and Betty had been joined by a third personality, of which they knew nothing, neither its origin nor its character, and for which they were become utterly and solely responsible.

After he had returned to the lonely little flat, Jacob continued to ponder that inscrutable happening. He felt more in touch with the world than he had ever felt before, and yet he had a sense that he was on the verge of some transcendental discovery.

"This," thought Jacob Stahl, "is the beginning of my life."

ENVOY

THE RENEWAL OF EFFORT

I HAVE followed the story of Jacob Stahl's life up to his forty-first year, and left him to face new beginnings on the night of Friday, the twenty-second of January, 1904. Beyond that point his history need not be told in detail. The character of his struggle has changed. I leave him no longer fighting the resistances offered by the economic and ethical forces of society. Ten years later his position in the world is established as firmly as is possible in a community such as ours—a community founded on a basis so radically unstable, that the whole fabric totters whenever that most fallible principle of credit or confidence is brought, however momentarily, into disrepute. And with the practical extinction of Jacob's need for opposition in this lesser social sense, he emerges into another conflict of so different a type that it cannot be satisfactorily treated in the pages of a novel. I have written explicitly of his attitude towards religion, but I have said little or nothing of his relations with God. Yet it should be plain to those who have found any sympathy with Jacob Stahl, that he could never rest content with any such attainment as was provided by the comfort of his wife's love, by the fine unselfish joy he finds in the care of his three children, or, least of all, by such satisfactions as come to him from his modest achievements in the world of letters.

He is ever at the beginning of life, reaching out towards those eternal values that are ever beyond his grasp. He is handicapped in many ways, and must continually regret his own ignorances and intellectual limitations, but he has not

been threatened by that decay of mind which slowly petrifies and finally kills those who fall into the habit of fixed opinions.

Indeed, he is far less critical than he once was, and sometimes deplures with a touch of whimsicality the consequent weakening of his abilities as a novelist. "It is an admirable thing, no doubt," he says, "to find good in everybody, and I admit that the good is always there if you will look for it. But you might as well try to paint sunsets in monochrome as write a novel with no villains in it." But he finds a solution to that problem in the fact that "goodness," like other qualities, is only relative, and so discovers the means for the necessary contrasts he desires, and smiles when his critics deplore what they call his "loss of virility."

And that earnest search of his for some aspect of permanent truth keeps his spirit young. Only the form of his struggle has changed. He may be content with his worldly circumstance, rich in his unchanging love for Betty and her children, but he can never be satisfied with himself nor with his own achievement. He has great ambitions to write a long essay on the intrinsic struggle of the spirit as revealed to him by the introspections of his own life; but while he has a volume of admirably phrased notes on various aspects of his own development, he admits that he still lacks sight of some definite, guiding motive that shall one day, he hopes, give form and purpose to the whole. He would still describe himself, in Emerson's words, as "a candidate for truth."

Virtue lies only in the continual renewal of effort; the boast of success is an admission of failure.

THE END.

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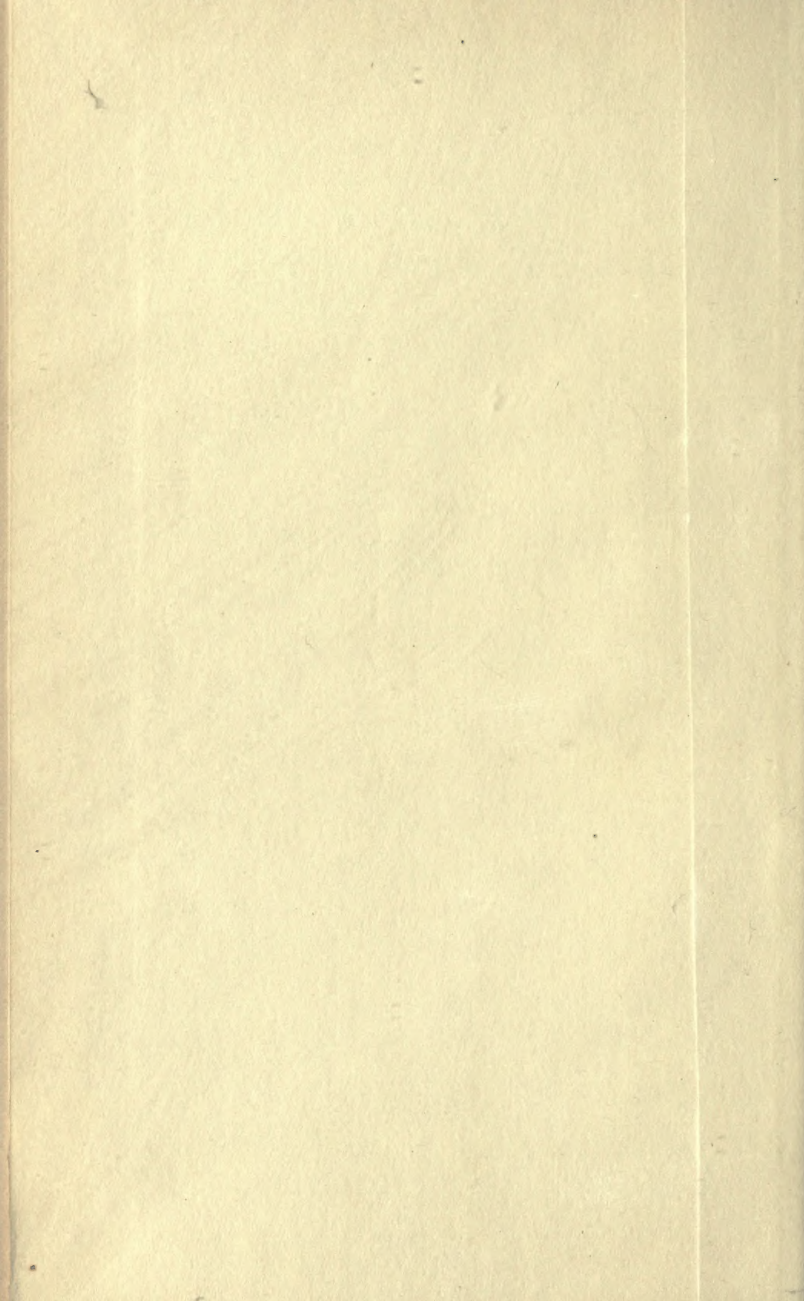
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